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The Significance of Ghosts

- Science, Religion and Social Criticism in Charles Dickens' *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*, *A Christmas Carol* and "The Signalman"

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Introduction

The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain (1848), *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and "The Signal-Man" (1866) are all works by Charles Dickens that tell stories about haunted men. Dickens employed spectres in many of his texts from the 1840s until the 1860s, and his contribution to the development of the ghost story in the Victorian era was very prominent. It was his stories that strengthened the association between ghost stories and Christmas for the middle-class (Henson 44; Briggs 40). Dickens was an important voice in the controversy regarding the nature of ghosts. In his weekly literary magazines *Household Words* (*HW*) and *All the Year Round* (*ATYR*) he published many popular ghost stories, but, as a journalist, he also questioned and examined many supernatural phenomena (Henson 44). He was very critical of superstitious belief, and often debated the reliability and authenticity of different spiritual manifestations (Henson 44). Louise Henson concludes that "Dickens's position in the ghost controversy can ... be identified as a naturalistic one, although the explanations he endorsed relied on occult as well as known physical forces" (61).

The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain, *A Christmas Carol* and "The Signal-Man" are all ghost stories from the mid-nineteenth century, a category of literature which definition many scholars disagree about. Ghost stories from the Victorian era have traditionally been associated with female writers such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, Charlotte Riddell, Amelia Edwards, or Violet Paget (Auerbach 280). However, this is something that Nina Auerbach strongly opposes in her article "Ghosts on Ghosts" where she states that, even if you do not take Dickens' Christmas ghost stories into consideration, there is no reason to argue that the ghost story specifically belonged to female authors in the nineteenth century (280). Victorian ghost stories have also been seen as horror tales belonging to the Gothic genre (Auerbach 280; Sanna 85). However, Srdjan Smajoc contradicts this notion in his article and states that ghosts seem to belong in almost every genre of literature, and therefore, consequently, nowhere (1107). This essay agrees with Auerbach and Smajoc, and will, rather than formulating any claims about the genre of Victorian ghost stories, examine what these stories can tell us about certain aspects of the time they were written.

The Victorian era was a period of constant change; industrialization and the rise of science made people doubt their religious beliefs. Consequently, many religious

and cultural aspects that were previously considered truths were suddenly questioned. What many have considered strange is that in these times of uncertainty there was a sudden rise in the interest in the supernatural (Gavin 19). Adrienne E. Gavin's explanation for the popularity of the ghost story is that it was a reassurance for the Victorian reader that not everything was changing (20). The ghost story reassured in two ways, firstly "by re-entrenching social and moral conventions", and secondly, by affirming certain Christian beliefs, such as the existence of an afterlife or that sinners will be punished after death (Gavin 20, 23). Lots of people have speculated about the sudden popularity of the ghost story and Spiritualism in the nineteenth century, but many agree with the explanation that Gavin advocates, that it in many ways reassured the Victorian reader and confirmed many Christian beliefs.

The aim of this essay is to examine in what way Dickens uses ghosts in *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*, *A Christmas Carol* and "The Signal-Man", and what this can tell us about what scientific explanations people had for the manifestation of ghosts. This essay will also argue, in agreement with Gavin (20), that these works reassured the Victorian reader by confirming certain social and moral conventions as well as certain Christian beliefs. *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* and *A Christmas Carol* confirm in different ways that there is an afterlife, that sinners will be punished after death and that Christmas time is sacred. There is also a prominent theme of repentance in both of these stories. The stories discussed in this essay furthermore seem to criticize the changes in Victorian society. The story of the signalman mirrors the common fear of rapid industrialization and draws attention to the dangers of technological advancements, while *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* and *A Christmas Carol* advocate greater awareness of the vulnerable and poor people in society. This essay will try to explain how these ghost stories by Charles Dickens managed to appeal to both the Christian and the more scientifically oriented reader, and at the same time raise social awareness.

Historical Context

The nineteenth century was a turbulent time where industrialism and science coexisted with supernatural beliefs and Christianity, and where hopes for the future collided with tradition and sentimental feelings about the past. For the Victorians, the nineteenth

century was filled with unexplainable phenomena; the supernatural seemed to inhabit both the cultural as well as the physical world. What came of the technical progress of the nineteenth century, such as telephones and railways, seemed to surpass the laws of science and often frightened people as much as it fascinated them (Bown, Burdett and Thurschwell 1; McLeod 7-8). According to Bown, Burdett and Thurschwell “the collapsing of time and distance achieved by modern technologies that were transforming daily life was often felt to be uncanny” (1). For most people electricity was just as baffling as communication with the dead, and the world just seemed to be inhabited by a multitude of inexplicable invisible forces (Bown, Burdett and Thurschwell 1). Furthermore, the lives of most Victorians, but especially the workers, were being vastly altered as a result of industrialization (Finucane 175). Small-scale rural life was replaced by overcrowded cities, and the demand of huge numbers of workers gave rise to unsanitary, vermin infested ghettos with poor food and water supplies where diseases spread quickly (Finucane 175; Moran 40-1). A certain sense of uncertainty seemed to prevail in the ever-changing nineteenth century. The fluctuations in the economy made people uncertain about their future while the theories of Darwin made them doubt their religious beliefs. It was in this time of uncertainty, where the interest and popularity of ghost stories and spiritualism reached new heights (Noakes 23; Gavin 19).

There seemed to be a lack of consensus about the nature of in the nineteenth century. Some people believed that ghosts had nothing to do with the natural world, that they were by definition supernatural, while others argued that these manifestations easily could be explained within the laws of science (Noakes 23). According to Noakes (28), different texts from the time upheld both “natural and supernatural explanations including evil spirits, angels, conscious acts of trickery, unconscious psychological and physiological mechanisms or hitherto unknown forces associated with the human body”. Many researchers tried to find scientific proof for ghosts and other supernatural phenomena, and a Society for Psychical Research was even established to determine the exact nature of them (Briggs 52; Bown, Burdett and Thurschwell 1). The prevailing explanations for why certain people were seeing ghosts were to be found in the human psyche. Spectral manifestations were seen as symptoms of some form of mental disturbance, but the science of psychology was not very developed in the nineteenth

century. Psychology was just being recognized as a serious field of study and was still regarded with great suspicion by many (Briggs 55, 143).

Many, including Dickens, believed that the visions that people experienced had their origins in the unconscious part of our mind. According to Briggs “[t]he dark side of the mind ... fascinated Romantic writers, and later the Victorians, though they were often shocked at what it might reveal” (55). In the middle of the nineteenth century, ghosts and other supernatural phenomena were seen as results of involuntary forces of the mind such as dreaming, hallucination or more serious mental disorders (Henson 45). What we today refer to as hallucinations were called ‘spectral illusions’ in the nineteenth century (Briggs 143), but this essay will use the term hallucination to refer to the phenomena of seeing ghosts. To come in contact with the unconscious, or in order to treat people who suffered from these hallucinations some medical practitioners used hypnosis or mesmerism. Anton Mesmer, who named the technique, believed that the therapeutic effects were a result of the manipulation of the magnetic poles of the human body, what he referred to as ‘animal magnetism’ (Finucane 180; Briggs 55, 60). In the Spiritualist movement, ‘mesmerism’ and ‘animal magnetism’ were said to be used to communicate with the dead, and in their view these techniques therefore provided them with a scientific explanation for what they were doing (Finucane 179). Dr John Elliotson, a good friend of Dickens’, was an advocate of mesmerism and openly used it as a therapeutic technique, but because it was not yet recognized as a legitimate method, it unfortunately led to his resignation in 1838 (Briggs 57; Finucane 180). According to Finucane, Elliotson “established a ‘mesmeric hospital’ in 1849 where he carried on trying to relieve suffering through conventional as well as psychological means” (180). Dickens later came to practice mesmerism, or hypnosis, himself and according to Briggs “he practiced effectively on his wife and on the artist Leech, though his most notable success was with Madame De la Rue, an hysteric who suffered from terrifying hallucinations which he alleviated” (57). Dickens’ acceptance of mesmerism was not unusual at the time. Many other prominent persons perceived it as a useful and valid science (Briggs 57). According to Tytler, Dickens was not just friends with many asylum doctors, but also visited a number of mental asylums in both Britain and America (422, 424). This proves that Dickens was well acquainted with, and

very interested in, the psychological explanations for why some people appeared to see ghosts.

The appearances of ghosts also gave support for certain Christian beliefs such as the existence of a soul and an afterlife. In the nineteenth century, most people were convinced that another life awaited them after their death, but this conviction was not enough for the Victorians (Gavin 19). The apparitions that manifested themselves in séances as well as popular ghost stories reaffirmed their faith at a time when Christianity was constantly being challenged by new scientific discoveries (Gavin 19; Noakes 26; Finucane 212). Moreover, according to Noakes, the rapid spread of Spiritualism “certainly owed much to widespread and long-established preoccupations about the afterlife and the immortality of the soul” (26). According to Briggs, the nineteenth century was “characterized by the establishment of a variety of sects and coteries – psychic societies, theosophy, the Spiritualist Church – as well as mystic or ritualistic movements within the framework of the Christian churches” (52). The relationship between Spiritualism and Christianity was reciprocal, supernatural phenomena gave the reassurance that Christianity desperately needed at the time, and the acceptance of supernatural phenomena in the Christian community gave rise to the rapid spread of the Spiritual movement.

The ghost stories of the nineteenth century also expressed concerns, campaigned for change and criticized the Victorian society. The Victorian era was a time when people showed an interest in social reform and individual rights as well as tradition (Moran 2). According to Moran, “‘Early Victorian’ culture, extending roughly to 1850, energetically embraced – even forced – changes, but, equally energetically, struggled to maintain a stable consensus about individual and communal purpose” (2). Literary works from this period gave the impression that the modern society was exciting as well as dangerous. They also criticized the bad conditions for the workers in the workhouses, factories and mines (Moran 11, 41). The ghost story in particular was often used by many novelists to advocate social awareness and moral order (Moran 89, 91). The people in the nineteenth century wanted technological and scientific progress, but not at any cost. There was a strong movement that worked hard to make people aware of the dangers and faults of industrialization.

The Scientific Explanation

The attitudes that people had towards ghosts were often ambiguous in the nineteenth century. At times they were seen as the result of involuntary forces of the mind, and at other times the ghosts seemed as real as us humans and were able to communicate with the living. These uncertainties regarding the nature of ghosts were used by many writers, as it widened the scope for the ghost story (Briggs 143). There is evidence that Dickens used common psychological explanations for ghost-seeing as narrative resources in the books and the short story discussed in this essay. The ghosts in these stories never appear without any premonition. Dickens creates a highly suggestive setting; it is usually dark, cold and late at night when the ghosts appear, and the protagonist is always alone. The ghosts can also be seen as manifestations of the psychological tension within the protagonists. In all three stories, the ghosts seem to appear as hallucinations, or in dreams as manifestations of the unconscious thoughts of the protagonist.

In *A Christmas Carol*, the natural explanation for Ebenezer Scrooge's first encounter with his deceased partner, Jacob Marley, is that he is having a hallucination. The first time Scrooge sees Marley is when he is about to enter his house. It is dark and late at night, and Dickens writes of the fog and frost around the doorway that "it seemed as if the Genius of Weather sat in mournful meditation on the threshold" (41). When Scrooge is about to unlock the door, the face of Marley suddenly appears in the knocker (41-2). The hallucination soon dissolves but the horrific image stays with him and sets his nerves on edge (42). The vision of Jacob Marley could very well be seen as a hallucination caused by Scrooge's memory of his deceased colleague and the darkness and the heavy fog around the doorway.

There are also many indications in *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain* that the protagonist is having a hallucination caused by the suggestive nature of the environment and his gloomy thoughts. Redlaw first seems to notice the presence of the spectre, leaning against the back of his chair, when he sits alone "among a crowd of spectral shapes raised there by the flickering of the fire upon the quaint objects around him" (126). The environment surrounding the chemist is, in the truest sense, ghostly. Dickens writes that the shadow of a lamp casts "a monstrous beetle on the wall" (126). Only when Redlaw is left alone, the apparition emerges from behind his chair, the

darkest place in the room (142). The chemist's senses seem to be distorted by the darkness and the shadows surrounding him, and in combination with the gloomy thoughts that trouble him, this strengthens the argument that the ghost that appears before him is a hallucination.

Even in "The Signalman" there is much evidence that the apparition is a hallucination caused by the protagonist's more serious mental disorder. The disorder is in turn a result of the nature of his work and the solitary and depressive environment that surrounds him. The story takes place in a very lonely and dismal place described by the narrator who explains that "[s]o little sunlight ever found its way to this spot, that it had an earthly, deadly smell; and so much cold wind rushed through it, that it struck chill to me, as if I had left the natural world" (2). It is compared to a dark dungeon with an air of death and otherworldliness around it. Graeme Tytler, who argues that the signalman suffers from partial insanity, agrees that the bleak environment and the lack of sunshine precipitate his crisis (425). In such a gloomy and lonely place it is not difficult to argue that the ghost's appearance again could be explained as a hallucination.

In all of the stories discussed in this essay, the ghosts' appearances, the hallucinations, can be explained as manifestations of the protagonists' psychological tensions. In relation to *A Christmas Carol*, Henson explains how "[s]ensations from the present are interwoven with ideas from a remembered past which temporarily become dominant, and are closely related to apprehensions about the future" (47). It could easily be argued that Scrooge falls asleep when he sits down by the fire with his gruel to ponder over the events of the day, and subsequently starts dreaming (43). In this altered state of mind, the memory of Marley and the spirit of Christmas, combined with Scrooge's concerns about the future, become the substance of his dream (Henson 47-8). In his dream, Scrooge is unable to control what he sees, but tells Marley that he does not rely on his own senses (45). He tries to be rational, but in the dream his rational thoughts do not have any power over the unconscious part of his mind, and it is only in this state that Scrooge is able to communicate with the ghosts or spirits that come to visit him in his sleep (Briggs 147; Henson 48). The natural explanation of the apparitions in this story is that Jacob Marley is a product of Scrooge's psychological tensions, his memories and concerns, which are manifested in a dream.

Scrooge furthermore encounters what Dickens describes as three spirits or ghosts, the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, and at this point Scrooge has totally given in to his altered state of mind which is crucial for the therapeutic process of the dream. For the rest of the story he does not question the spirits. He listens to them and tries to resolve the psychological tension that is the foundation for the spirits' manifestation. The fact that Scrooge surrenders to his visions and gives up rational thought and control is essential for his development (Henson 49). In this way Scrooge can learn from his dream, and when he wakes up, be able to act with a renewed will (Henson 49). The therapeutic aspect of ghost-seeing becomes apparent in *A Christmas Carol* where Scrooge, by disregarding rational and logical thought in his dream, is able to resolve his psychological tension and become a changed man.

In *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*, Redlaw undergoes a similar therapeutic change, but in this case it is not the result of the manifestation of his twin-ghost, who rather can be seen as a representation of his inner conflict. In this story Redlaw has to come to terms with what the apparition represents, which he does with the help of Milly. According to Briggs "[a]t this period ... the double is not so much an omen of death as a symbol of increasing conflict within the protagonist" (84). Also, in this story the more dangerous aspect of the unconscious mind becomes apparent (Henson 49). The apparition seems to be a manifestation of Redlaw's dark thoughts and troubles, and by coming to terms with his own past with the help of Milly, Redlaw is able to resolve his inner conflicts and lift the curse (227-8).

In "The Signalman" further explanation for the protagonists' visions would be that he suffers from partial insanity. The psychological tension that the signalman deals with has to do with his fear about the safety on the railway, and it could even be argued that he takes his own life at the end of the story. Henson argues that the signalman's "occupation ... demands a disproportionate amount of mental to physical endeavour, his sole responsibility consisting of exactness and watchfulness, unrelieved by any social interaction" (58). In his article Graeme Tytler agrees with Henson and argues for the case that the signalman suffers from some form of partial insanity (422). Tytler finds evidence for his case throughout the short story. The fact that the signalman is described as being troubled by the way he has spent his life and that he sees himself

as a social failure, that he lives in such a dark environment, and the fact that his death looks like a suicide all point to the fact that he is mentally ill (Tytler 425, 426). Even the physical appearance of the signalman is similar to that of a person who suffers from mental illness (Tytler 427). With this in mind it is not hard to argue that there is evidence in “The Signalman” that supports the claim that there is a natural explanation for the ghost’s appearance.

Christian Beliefs

The Christian explanation for ghosts clashes with the scientific one; the ghosts cannot possibly be the soul of a deceased person as well as the manifestation of the protagonist’s psychological tension at the same time. These contradicting ideas were what people had to deal with in the nineteenth century and what Dickens appears to carefully balance in these ghost stories. For these reasons this essay will examine both of these aspects, but it should be stated that although the Christmas stories have a very clear connection to Christian beliefs, this is lacking in “The Signalman” which was written about twenty years later. For this reason this essay will not discuss “The Signalman” in this section, even though it is very interesting to ask why it is that this connection is lacking.

By reinforcing certain Christian beliefs Dickens was able to give the Victorian readers the spiritual reassurance they needed (Gavin 20). Concerning Dickens’ Christmas books, Briggs writes that they are “inspired by their authors sense of Christianity as ideally an active and integrative force in society, the profound link between man and his fellowmen” (210). According to Oulton “[Dickens’] aim was always not to revamp Christ’s message, but to present it as clearly as possible to a modern reader in a way that would be universally accessible” (197-8). A *Christmas Carol* and *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* confirm the Christian convictions that there is an afterlife, that the soul is immortal, and that people, after death, will be judged for the way they have lived their life. These stories further reassure Christian readers that Christmas is sacred and that to condemn Christmas is blasphemous. There is also a prominent theme of repentance in both of these books.

In *A Christmas Carol* the Christian explanation for the ghosts’ appearances would be that the soul is immortal and that there is an afterlife. The question whether

there is a life that awaits us after our death is a precondition for the whole story. Already on the first page Dickens assures the reader that Jacob Marley is dead, but that he will appear just like Hamlet's father (33). Therefore, with his emergence Jacob Marley proves that there is an afterlife, even if he himself is condemned to walk the earth among other sinners to repent (44, 47-49). In this story, there is clear evidence for the Christian faith regarding the immortality of the soul.

In *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*, on the other hand, the ghost is but a mirror image of the protagonist and does therefore not confirm the assumption of an afterlife. In this story, it is Milly, the kind-hearted and good female character, who mirrors the Christian belief that there is a life after death where we again will meet the people we have loved. At the end of the story she states that "even when my child was born and dead but in a few days, and I was weak and sorrowful, and could not help grieving a little, the thought arose, that if I tried to lead a good life, I should meet in Heaven a bright creature, who would call me, Mother!" (227). The Christian belief that there is a life after death is in this way evident in both of the novels discussed in this essay.

The Christian notion that people who have lived a wrongful life will be punished after their death is most evident in *A Christmas Carol*, but it is also an important theme in *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*. According to Oulton, Dickens believed in the Judgement and she writes that "*A Christmas Carol* works towards a comic resolution, but significantly the spirits who visit Scrooge are sent to save him from damnation; if he fails to repent he will suffer the consequences after death, as Marley does" (129). When Jacob Marley first appears before Scrooge, Scrooge observes that he is wearing a heavy chain around his waist made of "cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel" (44). When Scrooge asks Marley about the chain he answers that he forged the chain when he was alive and that Scrooge's own chain is even longer and heavier (47). Marley confirms the Christian belief that the way you live your life has an impact on your life after death. He explains to Scrooge that "[i]t 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. It is doomed to wander through the world ... and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned

to happiness!” (47). Marley speaks here of the punishment of those who have lived a wrongful life and of how the soul is condemned to wander earth to witness all the troubles and sorrows of mankind.

The story about Redlaw concerns the Christian belief regarding lost souls. The argument presented in this story is that if one is unable to repent it is impossible to enter Heaven, and one’s soul is consequently lost. In *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* when Redlaw first receives his curse from his twin-ghost he hears a shrill cry which “sounded like the cry of some one in the dark who had lost the way” (149). Dickens also writes that Redlaw “looked confusedly upon his hands and limbs, as if to be assured of his identity, and then shouted in reply, loudly and wildly; for there was a strangeness and terror upon him, as if he too were lost” (149). Here Dickens seems to invoke the Christian belief that those who do not repent or, like Redlaw, are unable to repent because they cannot remember their sorrows, become lost souls. Later in the story, Redlaw meets a young man and his father in a lodging for travellers. The young man who has spent most of his life gambling is now dying and asks his father if there is any hope for him after his death (192). The father answers his son that “[t]here is hope ... for all who are softened and penitent” (192), and he cries out to God “Oh, Father ... take this wanderer back! Not as he is, but as he was then, let him cry to thee, as he has so often cried to us!” (193). He speaks of his son as a wanderer who has to find his way to Heaven, but when the son receives Redlaw’s curse he consequently forgets his sins and is unable to repent. The result of the curse is that he too becomes a lost soul. When he notices this he shouts to Redlaw: “I have lived bold, and I mean to die bold. To the Devil with you!” (194). This story strengthens the Christian notion that you have to seek repentance for what you have done wrong in your life to be able to enter Heaven, but if you do not seek repentance, or if you are unable to repent, your soul will forever be lost.

The sacredness of Christmas becomes apparent in *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* and *A Christmas Carol* where both protagonists, Redlaw and Scrooge, first condemn Christmas, but later, in accordance with their personal development, come to appreciate this time of celebration. This is a view that most certainly appealed to most Christian readers in the mid-nineteenth century. In *A Christmas Carol*, when Scrooge’s nephew wishes Scrooge a merry Christmas, he

replies that “If I could work my will ... 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” (36). Together with the Ghost of Christmas Present, Scrooge sees how the ghost disseminates the good spirit of Christmas with his torch and how Christmas is celebrated in the most remote places of the world (77). They visit miners, a lighthouse and finally a ship, and everywhere they go Christmas is celebrated with joy and warmth (85, 86). Dickens writes that

Much they saw, and far they went, and many homes they visited, but always with a happy end. The Spirit stood beside sick beds, and they were cheerful; on foreign lands, and they were close at home; by struggling men, and they were patient in their greater hope; by poverty, and it was rich. In almshouse, hospital, and jail, in misery’s every refuge ... he left his blessing, and taught Scrooge his precepts. (91)

Here Scrooge gets to experience the sacredness of Christmas, how it transforms the situation for the sick and poor. With the help of his four visitors, Scrooge becomes a changed man and Dickens writes in the end of the book that “it was always said of [Scrooge], that he knew how to keep Christmas well, if any man alive possessed the knowledge” (118). It seems to be an important part of Scrooge’s repentance that his opinion of Christmas changes. For him it goes from being an unprofitable time reminding him only of his deceased colleague, to a sacred time of celebration. The view of Christmas that the ghosts present in this story would most likely appeal to most people in the Victorian era, but especially the Christian readers.

For Redlaw there is nothing special or sacred about Christmas at the beginning of the story, but in the process of losing his memory and then regaining it he comes to realize the importance of Christmas. In this way, Redlaw’s twin-ghost is very much part of his transformation. Towards the end of the book his attitude has changed, he remembers Christ on the cross and finally invites everyone to a big Christmas dinner. At the beginning of the story Mr and Mrs William have come to put up Christmas decorations in his chambers. When they speak of Christmas, Redlaw only remarks: “Another Christmas come, another year gone! ... More figures in the lengthening sum

of recollection that we work and work at to our torment, till Death idly jumbles all together, and rubs all out” (134). For him, Christmas is only a sign that time is passing, and that we have more things to mourn and feel sorry for until death relieves us from our pain, but towards the end of the story Redlaw’s attitude changes as he starts to remember more and more. Dickens writes that:

Then, as Christmas is a time in which, of all times in the year, the memory of every remediable sorrow, wrong, and trouble in the world around us, should be active with us, not less than our own experiences, for all good, [Redlaw] laid his hand upon the boy, and, silently calling Him to witness who laid His hand on children in old time, rebuking, in the majesty of His prophetic knowledge, those who kept them from Him, vowed to protect him, tech him, and reclaim him. (227)

The image of Christ who died for our sins is invoked in the last pages of *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain*, an important but sad memory that is highly significant for all Christians. This would serve to reassure the Victorian reader of the importance and sacredness of Christmas.

In both *A Christmas Carol* and *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain*, there is a strong theme of repentance. According to Briggs:

The story of the Carol is significantly linked to the Christian festival, not only through its direct appeal to the Christian conscience, but also on a more symbolic level: in drawing an obvious contrast between Scrooge’s graceless Christmas Eve and his salvation with all mankind on Christmas morning, it celebrates the power of doomed but holy innocence (through the character of Tiny Tim) to redeem and bless the sinner. (40)

The Ghost of Christmas Present shows Scrooge the life of Bob Cratchit and his family, and when Scrooge asks him whether Tiny Tim, who suffers from a serious illness, will survive, he responds in Scrooge’s own words that “[i]f he be like to die, he had better do it, and decrease the surplus population” (82). Scrooge shows penitence when he hears

his own words recited to him (82). He is filled with sorrow and remorse when the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come later makes him see what will happen to Tiny Tim and Scrooge himself if he does not change his way of life (208). When the spirit is about to leave, Scrooge again shows a sense of repentance and tells him “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 lesson that they teach” (110). When Scrooge wakes up and realizes that he still has time to change his own and Tiny Tim’s destiny, he exclaims “Oh Jacob Marley! Heaven, and the Christmas Time be praised for this” (111). There is a strong sense of repentance in this story, Scrooge shows regret for the way he has lived his life and the way he has treated others and claims that he will honour Christmas, and learn from his mistakes.

In *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* both Redlaw and the dying man, whom Redlaw gave his curse, seek repentance for their wrong doings in life. For both characters Milly, who Redlaw’s twin-ghost guided him to, is their salvation (203). She makes them remember and repent. When Milly and Redlaw together visit the sick man, Milly explains that he “rose up in his bed, and, bursting into tears, stretched out his arms to [her], and said that he had led a mis-spent life, but that he was truly repentant now, in his sorrow for the past, which was all as plain to him as a great prospect, from which a dense black cloud had cleared away” (214-6). Here Milly again upholds the Christian values and helps Redlaw and the dying man to seek salvation.

Social Criticism

The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain, *A Christmas Carol* and “The Signal-Man” all seem to criticize some aspect of Victorian society. The ghosts in these stories all seem to have something to convey to the protagonist and the reader. In her article, Gavin writes that “*spirits* of the age, literary ghosts, served subliminally or overtly to send a message of reassurance to Victorians frightened by the *spirit* of the age, a spirit of religious doubt and social change” (20). In the previous section this essay shows how these stories reassured the Victorian reader spiritually, but in the following paragraphs this text will argue that these stories also have an underlying agenda which urges the reader to be more cautious about the changes caused by industrialization and to be more aware of the poor and destitute in society. In this way, these stories manage to reassure

the reader that certain values are still just as important and will not be altered by changes in society. According to Moran *A Christmas Carol* “passes over the religious implications of tormented spirits to comment on the evils of the selfish acquisitiveness, and the importance of empathy and generosity” (91). The moral value of *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* is that of forgiveness, but more than that it is about remembering our sorrows and by doing so becoming more caring and empathic people. If the issue raised in *A Christmas Carol* and *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* opposes more capitalist and egotistical values, the message in “The Signalman” opposes values concerning technological progress. “The Signalman” tells us to be more cautious and emphasizes the dangers associated with, in this case, the railway and the signalling system.

At the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge is described as extremely ungenerous and tough on the poor. He argues that the government should take care of them and believes that his small contribution is enough. Dickens’ description of Scrooge is that he is “[h]ard and sharp as flint, from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire” (34). When Scrooge is asked to give a small contribution to the poor, he refers to the prisons and workhouses and explains that “I don’t make merry myself at Christmas, and I can’t afford to make idle people merry. I help to support the establishments I have mentioned: they cost enough: and those who are badly off must go there” (39). When Scrooge receives the answer that some people would rather die than go to a workhouse, he answers that “they had better do it and decrease the surplus population” (39). Scrooge does not want to think about the poor and does not want to be reminded of them. He wants everyone to keep to themselves and he does not believe that there is anything special with Christmas that would make him more generous than he already believes that he is.

What Scrooge experiences with the Ghost of Christmas Past makes him regret the way he has spent his life, and he wishes that he had been more generous and not let money become such an essential part of his life. When Scrooge and the Ghost of Christmas Past visits his old employer Mr Fezziwig, and see the Christmas celebration he has put on for his employees and friends, Dickens writes that Scrooge acts “like a man out of his wits” (64). Scrooge becomes excited and happy, but when the ghost remarks how little money Mr Fezziwig has spent and that what he has done was only

“[a] small matter”, Scrooge gets angry and replies that “[i]t isn’t that ... his powers lies in words and looks; in things so slight and insignificant that it is impossible to add and count ’em up” and that “[t]he happiness he gives, is quite as great as if it cost a fortune” (64). Scrooge then remembers his clerk and becomes remorseful. Together with the Ghost of Christmas Past, Scrooge also visits the woman he once loved, Belle. The younger Scrooge and Belle have just decided to part ways and Belle explains how “[a]nother idol has displaced [her]” referring to his interest in money, and she tells him that “if it can cheer and comfort you in time to come as I would have tried to do, I have no just cause to grieve” (65). From these experiences Scrooge seems to realize what it means to be generous and that money has not given him what he hoped for in his life.

The Ghost of Christmas Present teaches Scrooge about being poor in the Victorian era, and that, while money can relieve and make it easier for people; it is not what makes a person happy. The Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to see how the Cratchit family celebrates Christmas. They are a very poor family that has suffered many hardships, but they celebrate Christmas with warmth and joy, and are very happy. Scrooge and the spirit later visit Scrooge’s nephew who, when asked about his uncle’s fortune, states that “[h]is wealth is of no use to him. He don’t do any good with it. He don’t make himself comfortable with it” (87). Together with the spirit, Scrooge takes part of the happiness that Christmas brings all over the globe and he seems to realize that money does not bring happiness, but that it can make a big difference for those who really need it. He therefore decides to be more generous, especially towards his poor employee Bob Cratchit.

In *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* Redlaw realizes the importance of remembering his sorrowful memories as well as the happy ones. He understands, with the help of Milly, that by doing so he will become a more empathetic and caring person. In relation to this story, Briggs writes that “[i]n an era increasingly characterized by social upheaval, it becomes correspondingly important to retain tradition and older ways of thinking, to remember our ghosts, if we are to maintain a sense of stability” (111). At the beginning of the story Redlaw is deeply troubled by his sorrowful memories, and the only way he sees to escape his sorrows is to take the offer his twin-ghost gives him. The sorrows that Redlaw carries mostly have to do with the earlier years of his life. When he talks to his twin-ghost, they remember together how

his mother and stepfather neglected him, how he lost his sister to his best friend and how his sister later died (144-6). These memories are compared to poison and curses, and the relief that the spectre offers Redlaw is compared to an antidote (146, 148). Milly and Mr William the older, on the other hand, argue that memories should be kept green, the sorrowful as well as the happy, for they make us appreciate life and others more fully. For the old man, his memories, some of which seem to be at least as dark and sad as Redlaw's, are a blessing for which he thanks God (137). Milly Swidger states that the memory of her dead child makes her more tender and caring towards poor and neglected children (226). Redlaw later comes to learn from Milly, who is the only one who can help him, and he praises her when his memories finally return to him again. At the end of the story, Redlaw understands the importance of keeping one's memories green, the good as well as the sad ones, because they, as Milly and Mr William the older prove, make us feel and show more empathy and caring as well as more appreciative of life.

The story about Redlaw conveys the message that it is important to remember and keep in mind one's sorrowful experiences so that one can feel the sorrows and hurts of those who are less fortunate, and thus show more empathy. In *The Haunted Man and the Ghost's Bargain*, a lonely boy suddenly appears before Redlaw, described by Dickens as “[a] baby savage, a young monster, a child who had never been a child, a creature who might live to take the outward form of a man, but who, within, would live and perish a mere beast” (150). Redlaw is unable to feel any sympathy for the child, but, what is more, the child is immune to Redlaw's curse (150). When Redlaw later asks his twin-ghost why the boy is unaffected by the curse and why he feels a certain connection to the boy, the spectre gives the answer that:

This ... is the last, completest illustration of a human creature, utterly bereft of such remembrances as you have yielded up. No softening memory of sorrow, wrong, or trouble enters here, because this wretched mortal from his birth has been abandoned to a worse condition than the beasts, and has, within his knowledge, no one contrast, no humanising touch, to make a grain of such a memory spring up in hardened breast. All within this desolate creature is barren wilderness. All within the man bereft of what you

have resigned, is the same barren wilderness. Woe to such a man! Woe, tenfold, to the nation that shall count its monsters such as this, lying here, by hundreds and by thousands! (204)

The ghost continues to speak about neglected children and explains to Redlaw that his curse has no power over the boy because “from this child’s bosom you can banish nothing” (205). The ghost explains that the boy “is the growth of man’s indifference”, and that Redlaw is “the growth of man’s presumption” (205). Here the ghost speaks of the neglected children in the Victorian era and condemns the ignorance of Redlaw and the rest of society.

The story about the signalman, on the other hand, mirrors a different kind of social criticism, playing on the public’s fear of rapid industrialization and technology. In the words of Moran, “‘The Signalman’ ... associates doom with modern technology (the railway)” (91). In this story, like many other stories from the Victorian era, the modern world is portrayed as dangerous and risky (Moran 11). The extreme mental demands of the signalling system are partly what drive the protagonist insane, and, a train is also what kills him at the end (Henson 58). The protagonist gives voice to the common fear of the dangers of the railway when he speaks to the narrator and explains to him that each time the ghost has appeared a horrible accident has followed (7-8). The signalman displays the same fear of the dangers of the railway that the general public did at this time, for him the fear becomes too much and subsequently drives him insane as has been stated earlier in this essay.

Conclusion

As has been stated in the introduction, the aim of this essay is to examine what the three ghost stories by Dickens discussed in this essay can tell us about certain parts of Victorian society. These ghost stories managed to appeal to not just the Christian reader, but also to the reader with a faith in science. In *A Christmas Carol* and *The Haunted Man and the Ghost’s Bargain* Dickens appeals to the Christian reader by confirming certain beliefs concerning the immortality of the soul, the existence of an afterlife and the sacredness of Christmas. There are also scientific explanations for the ghosts’ appearances in all three stories, as argued in this essay. The ghosts appear as

hallucinations or in dreams as manifestations of the protagonists' troubled thoughts. Scrooge and Redlaw are troubled by their past while the signalman seems to suffer from a more serious mental disorder. As many other ghost stories of the time, these stories also criticise certain aspects of Victorian society concerning industrialism and the situation of the poor.

These three aspects of Dickens' use of ghosts in these stories are of importance to fully understand why his ghost stories became so popular in the mid-nineteenth century. These stories also tell the reader a great deal about the time they were written. They tell us about the strong beliefs people had in Christianity as well as the supernatural, and how these beliefs collided with science and industrialism which forced abrupt changes in society and people's minds. There is also the moral aspect of these stories, and how Dickens managed to appeal to most Victorians and at the same time criticise industrialism and raise awareness of the poor. His popularity and impact on the Victorian society could possibly be explained by his recognition of the interest in ghost and his ability to create a medium where the many contradicting ideas about this phenomenon could meet.

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