



# Redemption and the imagination of childhood: Dickens's representation of children in *A Christmas Carol*



## Author:

David E. Robinson<sup>1</sup>

## Affiliation:

<sup>1</sup>Department of Education and Curriculum Studies, University of Johannesburg, South Africa

## Corresponding author:

David Robinson,  
davidr@uj.ac.za

## Dates:

Received: 18 May 2016

Accepted: 16 Aug. 2016

Published: 10 Nov. 2016

## How to cite this article:

Robinson, D.E., 2016, 'Redemption and the imagination of childhood: Dickens's representation of children in *A Christmas Carol*', *Literator* 37(1), a1307. <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/lit.v37i1.1307>

## Copyright:

© 2016. The Authors.  
Licensee: AOSIS. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution License.

This article considers the representation of children in Dickens's most famous Christmas book. Central to the article is a consideration of historical circumstances in which the book was written, as well as Dickens's own childhood, and the possibility of redemption through the force of the imagination from the negative consequences of social circumstances and personal choices. The changing conception of the Victorian child, from a conception of sinfulness to that of innocence, provides historical and theoretical positioning of the literary work. The role of childhood memory and its influence on Dickens's work is presented. The work of Edmund Wilson and the children's literary scholar Adrienne Gavin is included in this consideration of the short novel.

**Verlossing en die verbeelding van die kindjare: Dickens se voorstelling van kinders in *A Christmas Carol*.** Hierdie artikel oorweeg die uitbeelding van kinders in Dickens se bekendste Kersboek. Sentraal in hierdie staan die oorweging van die historiese omstandighede waarin hierdie boek geskryf is, asook Dickens se eie kindjare en die moontlikheid van verlossing, deur die mag van die verbeelding, uit die negatiewe gevolge van sosiale omstandighede en persoonlike keuses. Die veranderende opvatting van die Victoriaanse kind, van die idee dat kinders van nature sondig is tot die idee dat hulle suiwer en onskuldig is, plaas hierdie literêre werk histories en teoreties. Die rol van Dickens se herinneringe aan sy kinderdae en die invloed daarvan op sy werk word bespreek. Die werk van Edmund Wilson en die kenner van kinderliteratuur, Adrienne Gavin, word ingesluit in hierdie oorweging van die kort roman.

## Introduction

In this paper, I shall explore several representations of children in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (Dickens 1843). In doing so, I shall consider: (1) how children were conceptualised in the Victorian era, (2) the various presentations or imaginings of children in the novel and (3) how the author's lived experience of childhood informed these imaginings. In my consideration of representations of childhood, I shall consider several central characters, including Scrooge and Tiny Tim. I shall also argue that, for Dickens, the imagination provides the possibility and the means for redemption.

## Childhood in the Victorian era

I shall begin with a consideration of the view of childhood in the Victorian era. In his broad overview of the period, A.N. Wilson makes the following comment:

By the standards of a later generation, European childhood, up to the 1860s, was like human life itself, nasty, brutish and short. Not only was infant mortality high, childhood itself, if we define childhood in modern terms as a time of play, of learning, of innocent idleness and amusement, was virtually non-existent for the majority. Millions of children in the nineteenth century had the experience of working in a grown-up world when aged ten. Thousands of middle-class boys like [John Stuart] Mill would have been expected to conform in manner and even in dress to the *mores* of middle-aged parents. (Wilson 2007:131–132)

This view contrasts significantly with the 20th-century world of childhood as represented by Enid Blyton, amongst others, in which the days seem to be measured out by picnics and ginger beer. Significantly, child labour was not seen as anything unusual, and children were not regarded as being in a category of human other than smaller versions of parents; it was expected that they use their parents as models of behaviour and attitude. However, Wilson's position, while providing a valuable overarching statement, does not address the issue in terms of finer details.

## Read online:



Scan this QR code with your smart phone or mobile device to read online.



Another critic, Monica Flegel (Flegel 2009), provides several insights into the world of 19th century childhood in England. She states that attitudes to childhood were undergoing change during the Victorian period. In addition, the notion of children likely to experience neglect or emotional or physical abuse was not limited to the working class. Furthermore, the shift of attitude towards children had a basis in notions of morality or amorality, and how these elements were present or absent in the state of the child. Flegel comments on literary representations of childhood as follows:

Although the 'children of the poor' were often represented as endangered in nineteenth-century texts, they were by no means the only ones. In Victorian literature, in particular, the children of the middle and upper classes were also often represented as victims in need of rescue and protection.... Residual conceptions of childhood as a time of innate moral depravity, bolstered by the growth of Victorian Evangelicalism, meant that fear and discipline were the norm in many Victorian households.... Throughout the nineteenth century, then, this conception of childhood as a time of innate sinfulness had to contend with the emergent 'idea of childhood as properly a time of happiness'. (Flegel 2009:14)

Flegel's comment is of value because it suggests a society in which there is a sense of change. The social forces that govern attitudes and behaviour are undergoing transformation. In addition, she makes the point that there is an intersection between the world of lived experience and the world of literature, in that characters represented in the literature were mimetic of reality because their narratives reflected and commented on the broader social conditions in Victorian society:

... the early to mid nineteenth-century novel in England was particularly significant in developing new narratives about the plight of the lower and working classes and of the plight of the child.... And, of course, even those 'fictions that purport to deal with private life, particularly the private domain of the family, nevertheless intervene in public and social debates'.['] Writers such as Charles Dickens, for example, though not always necessarily engaged in writing what are now identified as 'social problem' novels, nevertheless used the novel as a space in which to make claims on behalf of England's suffering subjects. (Flegel 2009:16)

A further comment on the construction of childhood in the literature is made by Adrienne E. Gavin. Although her statement refers to Romantic poetry, it can be extrapolated to refer to Romantic literature or literature in general:

Romantic poetry constructed childhood as a desirable state, distinct from adulthood, for which adults longed: a lost, idealized, clear-visioned, divinely pure, intuitive, in-tune-with-nature, imaginative stage of life, of whose spirit adults felt the loss and sought to capture in literature. (2012:8)

Gavin adds: 'As Naomi Wood observes ... Dickens contributed to both realist portrayals of childhood – which critiqued social and cultural systems that fail to understand and accommodate children – and fantasy "depictions of the angelic child as too good for this fallen world"' (Gavin 2012:9).

1.This is a quote from Berry (1999:6).

It must be added that, in *A Christmas Carol*, there are also children clinging to the robe of the Ghost of Christmas Present. These children are not depictions of the angelic child, rather debased figures which are a product of a fallen world.

Laura Peters (2012) addresses Dickens's conception of childhood and points out that it is a Romantic rather than Calvinistic view:

Central to this [Romantic] inheritance is the conception of childhood as a special spiritual state of innocence: 'Trailing clouds of glory do we come/From God, who is our home'. Such a child is fresh from the Creator, unsullied by an earthly genealogy and as such provides a powerful force of inspiration. Conceiving of childhood as a special state of spiritually charged innocence offered powerful opposition to the largely Calvinist view of childhood as a state of inherent evil which required forceful religious instruction by parents and educators to overcome. (p. xiii)

Although Dickens was affected by the notion of the noble savage, on a trip to Italy in 1846 (3 years after the publication of *A Christmas Carol*), he experienced crowds of children in a state of poverty: 'a group of miserable children, almost naked, screaming' (Peters 2012:xv). These children lack nobility. 'Dickens is clear that a life of want and neglect will leave children in a state akin to savagery' (Peters 2012:xv).

Dickens was aware of the duality or set of oppositions in the conception of childhood; the Romantic notion of innocence, but the material conditions of poverty quickly creating something akin to William Blake's idea of experience – which opposes innocence (Peters 2012:xv).

Apart from the issue of childhood as a lived experience, it is significant that Dickens addresses the issue of death in his novel – he presents the idea of Scrooge's own death in Stave Four (as Dickens labels his chapters in this text – Michael Slater points out that this is the traditional organisation and/or labelling of the verses of Christmas Carols [Slater 2009:218]), and he addresses the death of Tiny Tim. The deaths of children and associated social practices are addressed in great detail by Lydia Murdoch in her article entitled "'The Dead and the Living": Child Death, the Public Mortuary Movement, and the Spaces of Grief and Selfhood in Victorian London' (Murdoch 2015). Murdoch makes the point that in Victorian London, the burial practices changed over time from an initial point in which dead bodies were stored in private residences before burial to the development of public mortuaries for this purpose. Linked to this change in the storage of dead bodies was a conception of the value of life. As Murdoch states:

The movement to create public mortuaries gained widespread attention by stressing the dangers that working-class practices of maintaining corpses within homes before burial posed to children and the very ideal of Victorian childhood. Thus the nineteenth-century urban campaign to create separate, distinct spaces for dead bodies paralleled the construction of childhood as a distinct age group characterized by what Viviana Zelitzer terms 'preciousness' or 'pricelessness'. (Murdoch 2015:379)



Murdoch points out that infant mortality was high – ‘Roughly one out of every seven Victorian infants died in the first year alone’ (Murdoch 2015:381). The loss of an infant life would therefore have been a regular experience in families, and their sense of loss and grief was in all likelihood frequent and keenly felt. This sense of the fragile nature of infant lives is reflected in the Cratchit family’s response to the loss of Tiny Tim in Scrooge’s final visionary experience.

Murdoch makes another significant comment regarding the conception of childhood in the Victorian era:

Historians ... have shown that the bourgeoisie drew on the teachings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the Romantics, and the Evangelicals to conceptualize childhood as a life stage characterized by education in anticipation of adulthood and, in some cases, playfulness rather than work. Although the religious emphasis on original sin persisted, by the late nineteenth century a belief in childhood innocence predominated. Ideal childhood came to be understood as a period characterized by dependence, during which children remained in need of protection from the assumed immoralities of industrial, urban life, including, most of all, the ravages of early death. (Murdoch 2015:381)

It is clear from the statements made by Wilson, Flegel, Gavin, Peters and Murdoch that the conception of childhood in the Victorian era was not a simple matter. The notion of childhood changed over a period of time from the religious position that children were inherently sinful to the Romantic view of childhood as a time of purity. Tiny Tim is clearly part of the later conception of childhood, and the young Scrooge, as will be seen, was probably also part of this understanding. The material conditions in which the working class existed contributed to the notion of the value of young lives. These understandings of childhood inform the literature of the time.

## The novel childhood, and imagination

I shall now address matters in the novel, beginning with the central character, Ebenezer Scrooge, who, at the start of the novel, is a businessman of mature age.

The initial description of Scrooge suggests that he lacks an interest in his fellow humans and that he is devoted entirely to the pursuit of wealth:

Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grindstone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. (Dickens 1843:11)

It is significant that he is compared to hard, physical objects – a grindstone and flint – and that the only living thing to which he is compared is an oyster, which identifies Scrooge with an organism lacking in human qualities, although the reader will concede that the comparison is typical of Dickens, and a humorous response is also evoked. His behaviour is shown to be that of a miser – somebody who values the acquisition of money above all else. The list of attributes is of interest because

there is a sense of physical manipulation in several of the words – squeezing, wrenching, grasping, which are terms indicating a lack of sensitivity – and these words also suggest that Scrooge imposes his will on the world around him, forcing it to produce the results he desires. One question the reader might ask is how Scrooge came to be like this. Part of the answer is found in his childhood, on which I comment below.

In the short novel, Dickens presents the reader with several images of childhood, each distinct from the other. In some cases, they are representations of real children, such as Tiny Tim, but in other cases, they are dreams or memories of children and events of many years earlier in Scrooge’s life. Scrooge is visited by ghosts who present to him images of the past, present and future, and Scrooge experiences these visits in a dream-like way.

The first ghost – the Ghost of Christmas Past – takes Scrooge on a journey through childhood, amongst other things. Scrooge recognises many of the physical landmarks on the way to his old school. The pair pass a group of children who are described as follows: ‘All these boys were in great spirits, and shouted to each other, until the broad fields were so full of merry music, that the crisp air laughed to hear it’ (Dickens 1843:46).

The image presented is one of carefree children enjoying their lives. They are presented in a natural setting in which the wide-open spaces are celebrated, but this setting contrasts with the home in which the young Scrooge lives. Moreover, it is not only the young Scrooge who lives in a home devoid of warmth; the living spaces of the Cratchit family are limited and constrained although the merriment with which Bob Cratchit expresses himself – sliding on ice, carrying Tiny Tim on his shoulder and acting in a light-hearted way – does not reflect the constraining physical environment. Indeed, the following description of Bob Cratchit’s behaviour suggests that he is captured by the spirit of Christmas:

[He] went down a slide on Cornhill, at the end of a lane of boys, twenty times, in honour of its being Christmas-eve, and then ran home to Camden town as hard as he could pelt, to play at blindman’s buff. (Dickens 1843:22)

To return to the issue of Scrooge’s childhood, the child that was Scrooge at the time was not part of the merriment in which the other boys shared, as noted by the Ghost:

‘The school is not quite deserted’, said the Ghost. ‘A solitary child, deserted by his friends, is left there still’. Scrooge said he knew it. And he sobbed. (Dickens 1843:47)

The pair then proceeds to the house, and it is shown to be a place lacking in warmth, both emotional and physical, and Scrooge’s former self – a young child – is presented to the reader. The child is sitting by a feeble fire, reading. The room is described as bare and melancholy, and the only furniture is desks and chairs:

At one of these a lonely boy was reading near a feeble fire; and Scrooge sat down upon a form and wept to see his poor forgotten self as he used to be. (Dickens 1843:47)



The image is one lacking in joy, but then Scrooge (in his present state) sees images deriving from the boy's book appear outside the window. The images, conjured up by the boy's imagination, pass in procession outside the window. The older Scrooge then lists the people and things that he sees, and he becomes animated and joyful.

The first image and/or vision is 'dear old honest Ali Baba!' (Dickens 1843:48) This is swiftly followed by other visions from *The Arabian Nights* and *Tales of the Genii* (Slater 2009:11). After this, the images of Robinson Crusoe, Crusoe's parrot and Friday are mentioned (Dickens 1843:49).

*The Arabian Nights* figures are significant in that for a British child, like Scrooge (or Dickens himself), these are figures of the imagination. They are exotic, removed from the dull and dreary world in which Scrooge finds himself. They are of the world of adventure, which holds much potential. They are a shift from the material to the possible, or, even more interestingly, the world of the impossible, in that they exist in the imagination. As such, they are similar to the three Ghosts of Christmas, in that these too are not of the material world. It is significant that the world of the imagination sustained the young Scrooge, and it is the world of the imagination that, through a series of images, will provide the older Scrooge with redemption.

The Robinson Crusoe figure is also worthy of some consideration. Scrooge first notices the image of the parrot (Dickens 1843:49), and this leads to the recognition of Crusoe himself, and Friday somewhat later.

Crusoe is an interesting figure, because, like Scrooge – young and old – he is alone for much of his narrative. However, his separation from people is brought about by material circumstances – a shipwreck – whereas Scrooge is alone because of social circumstances. Crusoe is not only a symbol of a man who is alone, but he is also a symbol of fortitude and resolution. One further element of Crusoe is that he is initially part of British society, then is beyond the limits of the society while he is on the island and then returns to British society. In a sense this is a pattern similar to that of Scrooge – initially part of the society, then removed from the society, although not by a shipwreck but through his own actions, and then returning to the society through his own decision or agency once he gains enlightenment through the visits of the ghosts.

Another point about Crusoe is made by John Richetti (2001), in which he makes reference to an episode in Defoe's novel. The episode occurs at a point at which Crusoe realises that there are cannibals on the island. He dreams of a way in which to deal with this matter (Richetti 2001:xxvi). He then bases his further action on what he has dreamed, and his intention is fulfilled. Richetti points out: 'That things happen exactly, or almost exactly, as in his dream is only a possible rather than a likely or probable event, we might say' (Richetti 2001:xxvii).

It is perhaps a significant point that *Robinson Crusoe* was one of Dickens's favourite books (Slater 2009:11) and that dreaming of a possible outcome leads Crusoe to act in a particular manner. The significance of dreaming is, it would seem, an established element of the formative reading of Dickens's youth, and the reappearance of this phenomenon in his own writing should not be unexpected. Crusoe's dream leads to a happy outcome, and Scrooge's dreaming does the same. However, the various ghosts in *A Christmas Carol* are far more prominent in Dickens's work than the dream element of Crusoe's experience.

It seems that the boy Scrooge took refuge in the world of the imagination, because the material world in which he lived offered so little. This is a significant point, because Dickens is possibly suggesting that Scrooge coped with the limitations of his world by venturing into fantasy worlds. However, it is clear that, at the start of the novel, this element of wonder in Scrooge is no longer a dominant element. At an early point in the novel his initial reaction to Marley's ghost is an indication of his lost ability to imagine or wonder. He says that the spirit is more likely to be a result of indigestion than something supernatural – 'There's more of gravy than of grave about you, whatever you are' (Dickens 1843:29). Marley's ghost refers to Scrooge as a man of a worldly mind, and this informs the reader that Scrooge is no longer engaging in acts of the imagination whatever his childhood behaviour might have been. The 'worldly mind' limits Scrooge's ability to speculate about alternative possibilities in life.

The episode of Scrooge's childhood experience in the schoolroom is followed by other visions of Scrooge's youth, one of which is within the scope of this paper. The reader is presented with a vision of a young Scrooge talking to a young woman. She indicates that she has been displaced by a golden idol, in other words, money (Dickens 1843:59). It becomes clear that Scrooge as a young man had intended to marry the woman, but that his nature had changed as he began to pursue wealth, and, as a consequence, they parted. Scrooge has come to prefer money or wealth to the company of others. In her book on Dickens and creativity, Barbara Hardy refers to 'the childhood deprivation which has made Scrooge what he is at the wide-awake start of the novel' (Hardy 2008:99). It is through the miserly Scrooge that the reader experiences his character's change and redemption. If Scrooge had had a happy childhood, it is likely that he would not have developed to hold the 'Bah! Humbug!' attitude he maintains for much of the novel, and he would not have been in need of the ghostly visitors. The novel, then, depends on Scrooge's unhappy childhood for some – perhaps most – of its impetus.

Another vision of children (and by extension, childhood) is reflected in the two figures that cling to the Ghost of Christmas Present and are hidden under his robes for most of Stave Three. These children become apparent in the final minutes of the ghost's interaction with Scrooge, and Scrooge questions the Spirit about them:

'Forgive me if I am not justified in what I ask', said Scrooge, looking intently at the Spirit's robe, 'but I see something strange,





and not belonging to yourself, protruding from your skirts. Is it a foot or a claw?"

'It might be a claw, for the flesh that is upon it', was the Spirit's sorrowful reply. 'Look here'.

From the foldings of its robe, it brought forth two children: wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable. They knelt down at its feet, and clung upon the outside of its garment. (Dickens 1843:100)

The children are incongruous figures because the Ghost of Christmas Present is a resplendent figure clothed in green – the symbol of life – and carrying a burning torch shaped like 'Plenty's horn' (Dickens 1843:70). He is described as a 'jolly Giant, glorious to see' (Dickens 1843:69), and his eyes are shown to be kind (Dickens 1843:70). For these children to be in his presence, clinging to him and hidden from view for the most part is unexpected. Their abject state is a notable contrast with the sense of plenty that is associated with this ghost.

The first element of the description of these children is of a hand that is claw like – it is a description that removes humanity from the children. The hand, we may assume, is indicative of a human hand that lacks flesh, as a result of poverty and the associated lack of food. The lack of food results in a physically wasted condition. The children are described in further detail as follows:

They were a boy and girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. (Dickens 1843:100–101)

The terms 'pinched' and 'twisted' are similar to the terms mentioned in the initial description of Scrooge – 'squeezing', 'wrenching' and 'grasping' – suggesting, perhaps, that they are the consequences of similar trying circumstances. The fact that they are a boy and a girl suggests an ironic comment on ideal families. These children are not the product of happy homes. There is no sense of a joyful future about them, no sense of human potential. Instead, there is a sense of neglect and degradation. These children contrast strongly with the images of children playing in the fields, shown to Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Past in the previous Stave.

The boy and girl differ from other children presented by the ghosts. The children playing in Stave Two, mentioned above, and the children of the Cratchit family are all real children, who are presented by the ghosts, whereas these two children are symbolic and do not have a connection to particular children in the real world. Their symbolic status is established by the ghost, who refers to them as Ignorance (the boy) and Want (the girl) (Dickens 1843:102). The ghost also warns Scrooge to beware of the children, but more particularly the boy (Dickens 1843:102). Clearly, ignorance is regarded by the ghost, and by implication the author, as a very unfortunate condition. This notion of ignorance is not merely a lack of scientific or worldly knowledge but could also include

ignorance of the human condition. In other words, by removing himself from his fellow humans, and valuing only that which is material, Scrooge is engaging in an act of ignorance and this does not bode well for him.

Peter Ackroyd observes:

Everybody now remembers the miser, together with Tiny Tim, but for Dickens the two principal figures of the story were the phantoms of Ignorance and Want that are shown to Scrooge. (Ackroyd 2002:69)

Brandon Chitwood (2015) makes the following comment:

Unlike Dickens's gallery of poor orphans, these children are figures of horror, not pathos. They are meant to chill the blood, not warm the heart. The ghost's monstrous children suggest no program for change. Their rhetorical function is less logical than visceral. (Chitwood 2015:680)

Ackroyd writes more extensively about the sources of the novel, stating that the origin of *A Christmas Carol* can be dated:

to the summer of 1843, when Charles Dickens visited a 'ragged school' in Field Lane: this was one of a number of such places, generally established by Evangelicals, where the children of the very poor were supposed to be given the rudiments of an education. (Ackroyd 1991:93)

He adds that Dickens wrote of the Field Lane school:

Side by side with the Crime, Disease, and Misery in England, Ignorance is always brooding. *A Christmas Carol* is on one level an attack on the very conditions of the time. (Ackroyd 1991:93)

Ignorance is therefore directly linked with social ills.

Three weeks after the visit to the school, Dickens made a speech at the Manchester Athenaeum – a place to educate the working class – and he stated that 'ignorance itself was the most prolific parent of misery and crime' (Ackroyd 1991:93). It is clear from these references that the issue of ignorance was of great importance to Dickens and that he saw this matter as being at the root of many social evils. It is clear from his visit to the school, and his speech and associated commentary, that Dickens locates the children in Scrooge's vision within a set of material conditions in London itself, and it is clear that, although ignorance is a concept, it has very significant material consequences.

I shall now move on to consider the most famous figure of childhood in the novel – Tiny Tim. In addition, I shall make brief reference to Tiny Tim's elder brother, Peter.

Tiny Tim is the most noteworthy child in the Cratchit household, and his words ('God bless us every one!') are the final words of the book. The beloved son of Bob Cratchit, he is a central figure in the novel. He is also a person with a disability; he walks with a crutch and he has an iron frame for his body (Dickens 1843:79). Despite this he is described as 'active' (Dickens 1843:80). Tiny Tim's active nature is an indication of his resolution and fortitude. He is clearly an example of making the best of things in the face of adversity.



After his death (in the vision of the Ghost of Christmas yet to come) the Cratchit family talks about Tiny Tim, and Mrs Cratchit remarks that Bob could walk swiftly with Tiny Tim on his shoulder, suggesting that the child was no burden at all (Dickens 1843:120).

In this same vision, it is stated that the spot where Tiny Tim is buried is green (Dickens 1843:121), a colour connoting life. It differs from the dull environment in which he lived. Bob promised to walk there every Sunday, suggesting a continued parental commitment. This response to Tiny Tim's death is different from the vision that Scrooge has of his own death and grave. Scrooge's grave is neglected, and he is not loved by others (Dickens 1843:124–125).

Tiny Tim has garnered some disapproving commentary from critics. For example, Philip Hobsbaum (1972) has the following to say:

What is bad [in the novel] is the tendency to sketch in an archetype – the death of Cratchit's son, Tiny Tim, is one such example – as a means of triggering off an emotion already set up in us. (Hobsbaum 1972:90)

In Dickens's presentation of Tiny Tim, the physical infirmity is a central element of the child's description. It must be noted that, as a child, Dickens himself had spasms that lasted from the time in the blacking factory onwards – in short, he was disabled (Ackroyd 2002:10). Ackroyd points out that this infirmity prevented Dickens from participating in games and other activities with children.

Loesberg (Loesberg 1997) explores the representation of childhood deformity in the writings of Dickens and makes the following assertion

Victorian fiction, while not always referring to an industrial background, also frequently contrasts deformity to high inner worth in children – and not only in Dickens... But Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and the Doll's Dressmaker in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–65) indicate the importance of physical distortion in children to their representation of a certain kind of moral touchstone in Dickens. And it will turn out, even the vagueness with which that touchstone is formulated will become part of its moral truth. (Loesberg 1997:580)

For Loesberg, it seems that Dickens created childhood figures that, although lacking in physical perfection, achieved a higher moral order, and, as such, could be regarded as the guides or touchstones of a society seeking moral direction. However, the moral significance is merely alluded to, rather than explicitly stated, and it is in this vagueness that some of the value of the children lies. It would seem that, in being a person with a disability, Tiny Tim acts as a measure for others about how much worse their own lives could be.

I shall now move on to a consideration of another child – Tiny Tim's older brother. Peter Cratchit is initially introduced in Stave Three as a young man who is moving towards adulthood. He wears collars, borrowed from his father, that mark him as an adult, but the collars are too large and suggest

that he lacks the maturity of years of experience (Dickens 1843:78). However, he is the eldest son and heir apparent to the role of master of the house. As such Peter occupies a place between childhood and maturity, and he represents the notion of possibility or potential.

Later, in the next Stave, we encounter him again, although somewhat older. In this vision he is reading the Bible to comfort the family after Tiny Tim has died. He is described as being on the point of receiving better employment, to be adopting greater responsibility. The position comes about from both Scrooge's nephew's intervention and Scrooge's death (Dickens 1843:122).

Peter, therefore, and the Cratchit family benefit materially from Scrooge's death. It is this vision, along with others in which Scrooge is mocked by various people after his death, that contributes to his change of character. Two elements contribute to the greatest extent: the notion of Tiny Tim's death and the vision of Scrooge's untended grave.

This change of character is not, however, easily accepted by all critics. Hobsbaum observes:

[T]he conversion of Scrooge, as a result of all this, is rather thin: the characteristics which made him distinctive are lost, and he turns into another of Dickens's benevolent old gentleman, substitute fathers, rushing up and down, half smiles and half tears, seeking whom they can succour. (Hobsbaum 1972:90)

This is an important point to note. The qualities of Scrooge at the start of the novel grant him some grittiness, some aspects of the curmudgeon, that appeal to the reader. His manner, his actions and his use of language set him apart from the status of what Hobsbaum terms 'another of Dickens's benevolent old gentlemen'. Although we are presented with a reformed Scrooge and a happy ending, the Scrooge figure at the end of the novel is bland in comparison with the earlier figure.

Edmund Wilson, in his 1929 essay on the two Scrooges, writes insightfully about the qualities of both Dickens and Scrooge. He claims that there is a 'duality which runs through all of Dickens' – a duality that swings between the merriment of Christmas and Scrooge's moroseness. Wilson refers to the memories that two of Dickens's daughters, Kate and Mamie, had of him. They recalled his Christmas parties and generosity, but in Kate's case she also refers to Dickens's faults and calls him a wicked man (Wilson 1929:52–53).

In Wilson's opinion, the duality of Dickens's nature is reflected in Scrooge, and he asserts that Scrooge would not have sustained his new-found generosity of spirit, but instead would have relapsed 'into moroseness, vindictiveness and suspicion' (Wilson 1929:53). Wilson adds that Scrooge was trapped in a cycle of manic depression. This last point, however, must be challenged, because it is clear from the narrative that the merry Scrooge had been absent for decades, and any 'cycle' is therefore unlikely: Scrooge's state had been unvarying for a long time.



## Dickens's lived experience as a child

Finally, I shall examine certain aspects of Dickens's life, particularly his childhood, to show how his imaginative work was informed to a large degree by his lived experience. I shall consider how Dickens's life and the imagination reflected in his novels intersected, and how the latter was informed by the former.

It is well known that the most significant formative moment of Dickens's childhood occurred when his father, John Dickens, experienced financial difficulties and was sent to Marshalsea prison (Slater 2009:20–21). John Dickens took his entire family with him, with the exception of Charles. John arranged for Charles to be employed in Warren's blacking factory, putting labels onto bottles. This episode – the imprisonment of the family and Charles's employment – took place in February 1824 when Dickens had just turned 12 years old (Slater 2009:20).

Mackenzie and Mackenzie make the following comment:

Just as the shock of going to work at Warren's factory had been worse than the actual hardship, so the loneliness of his new situation was harder to bear than penury. He had been cast into premature manhood and hankered for the childhood he had so traumatically lost. (Mackenzie & Mackenzie 1979:15)

Once John Dickens's financial situation improved, it was no longer necessary for Charles to continue in the blacking factory. However, Mrs Dickens, his mother, felt that he should continue in this employment for the additional few shillings a week. Charles felt irrevocably betrayed by his mother's desire to return him to manual labour (Ackroyd 2002:11; Mackenzie & Mackenzie 1979:16). His father supported him, and instead of returning to work he returned to school.

The episode in the blacking factory resulted in two things. Firstly, it interrupted and corrupted Dickens's own childhood and, secondly, it provided Dickens with a sense that childhood was a valuable period in life.

Another notable element of Dickens's childhood was his exposure to his father's library, which included books such as *Tom Jones*, *Robinson Crusoe* and other classics. As noted earlier, *Crusoe* is also part of Scrooge's childhood reading (Mackenzie & Mackenzie 1979:10; Slater 2009:10). This intersection of lived experience and the experience of the characters is not coincidental.

It was these books, Dickens later said, which 'kept alive my fancy, and my hope of something beyond that place and time', creating a private world into which he increasingly withdrew as he sat reading on his bed, taking imaginary voyages and dreaming of exotic adventures (Mackenzie & Mackenzie 1979:10).

Slater makes a similar point about the value of Dickens's father's library and adds that the books were a source of inspiration for his own writing:

Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, Goldsmith's *The Vicar of Wakefield* and *The Arabian Nights* and *Tales of the Genii* seem especially to have

seized his imagination judging by the way that specific allusions and general references to them, along with Shakespearean ones, pervade all his writings, both public and private.... From the time of writing *A Christmas Carol* onwards, Dickens celebrated the wonder and delight of all his childhood reading many times. (Slater 2009:11)

## Conclusion

Throughout this article, I have made reference to elements in Scrooge's life – particularly his childhood – that strongly echo aspects of Dickens's own childhood. There is evidence that these parallels are valid, but we must note that *A Christmas Carol* is a work of fiction, not an autobiographical account. Although there is evidence that shows a similarity between Dickens's life and that of his creations, Dickens and Scrooge are, of course, not one and the same. Having the same sort of childhood experience is one thing, but the record shows that Dickens enjoyed Christmas and did not engage in comments of the 'Bah! Humbug!' kind. The images of characters from childhood reading are an assertion of the imagination of childhood, and the loneliness experienced by the child Scrooge is an echo of Dickens's own loneliness as a child. The young Scrooge escaped to an imaginary world, and the ghosts escort Scrooge through other imaginings or dreams. After the similarities of childhood experience, Scrooge and Dickens followed different paths to adulthood, and the similarities become very much less evident.

Hardy (2008) makes reference to Dickens's experience as a child, including the difficult times of the blacking factory. However, despite this hardship, for Hardy the exploration of the streets of the great city would be a source of inspiration for the creative works to follow:

The solitude and humiliation he felt when he was 11 or 12 – of course many children of his time and class started work at that age – began his fearful, compassionate, amused, and excited discovery of London's mean streets, its great filthy river, its crime, drunks, prostitutes, crowds and lonely people, which all go into the creation of *Oliver Twist*, *Fagin*, the *Artful Dodger*, *David Copperfield* and the terrible children *Ignorance* and *Want* in Scrooge's Christmas dream. In London's humanity Dickens found his own, and the discovery was painful and creative. (Hardy 2008:2)

Hardy's opinion is supported by the following claim from Ackroyd: 'But memory was for him more significant than any cognitive power, and indeed in many of his works it is seen to be the very spirit of imagination itself' (Ackroyd 1991:6).

Both Hardy and Ackroyd emphasise that Dickens's childhood experiences informed his writing to a large degree. In particular, he relied on childhood memories for many of the characters and episodes in his writing, particularly after his return from the United States of America in 1842, 1 year before the writing of *A Christmas Carol* (Slater 2009:15/16).

Hardy makes the following point about Scrooge's redemption: 'Scrooge is the heartless man to whom providence offers a



second chance through his dreaming and imaginative cure for his defects of imagination' (Hardy 2008:99). Scrooge's redemption is through the imagination – firstly, in childhood, his imagination provides him with the escape to the world of Ali Baba and Crusoe; and, secondly, in his adult years, the ghosts are figures of dreams or the imagination, and they provide him with insight that leads to salvation.

However, just as Scrooge is to be saved through the imagination, the young Dickens was saved from the burden of the real world and found a haven in the world of fiction and the imagination. It is through the imagination that the mature Dickens is saved from mediocrity; it is the medium through which both Scrooge and Dickens are able to flourish and find their true selves.

## Acknowledgements

### Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships which may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

## References

- Ackroyd, P., 1991, *Introduction to Dickens*, Sinclair-Stevenson, London.
- Ackroyd, P., 2002, *Dickens: Public and private passion*, BBC, London.
- Berry, L., 1999, *The child, the state, and the Victorian Novel*, p. 6, University of Virginia Press, Charlottesville, VA.
- Chitwood, B., 2015, 'Eternal returns: A Christmas Carol's ghosts of repetition', *Victorian Literature and Culture* 43, 675–687.
- Dickens, C., 1843, *A Christmas Carol*, Penguin, London.
- Flegel, M., 2009, *Conceptualizing cruelty to children in nineteenth-century England. Literature, representation, and the NSPCC*, Ashgate, Farnham.
- Gavin, A. (ed.), 2012, *The child in British literature: Literary constructions of childhood, medieval to contemporary*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke.
- Hardy, B., 2008, *Dickens and creativity*, Continuum, London.
- Hobsbaum, P., 1972, *A reader's guide to Charles Dickens*, Thames and Hudson, London.
- Loesberg, J., 1997, 'Dickensian deformed children and their Hegelian sublime', in L. Peters (ed.), *Dickens and childhood*, pp. 579–608, Ashgate, Farnham.
- Mackenzie, N. & Mackenzie, J., 1979, *Dickens: A life*, Oxford University Press, Oxford.
- Murdoch, L., 2015, '"The dead and the living": Child death, the public mortuary movement, and the spaces of grief and selfhood in Victorian London', *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth* 8(3), 378–402. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/hcy.2015.0043>
- Peters, L. (ed.), 2012, *Dickens and childhood*, Ashgate, Farnham.
- Richetti, J., 2001, *Introduction to Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe*, Penguin, London.
- Slater, M., 2009, *Charles Dickens*, Yale University Press, London.
- Wilson, A.N., 2007, *The Victorians*, Hutchinson, London.
- Wilson, E., 1929, *The wound and the bow*, Ohio University Press, Athens, OH.