

How Can You Eat at A Time Like This?: An Analysis of Poverty and Charity in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*

Rae'Mia Escott

Department of English, Rhetoric, and Writing

Berry College

227 Martha Berry Hwy NW, Mount Berry, GA 30149, USA

Email: mescott@berry.edu

Abstract:

While poverty does not discriminate against race, age, gender, or religion; it does play a role in the separation of classes. In this paper, I will examine at length how Dickens takes his London reality of impoverishment and shapes it into a context for all to digest as a serious issue. I depict the importance of charity via characters in *A Christmas Carol* and expose the weaknesses of the social hierarchy that exists in this society. Impoverished people not only need the State's help to improve their unfortunate positions, but they also rely on the generosity of their fellow citizens, which, sadly, does not always happen. This novella, as a ghost story, illustrates the true horrors of classism, penury, and the social justification of immoral behaviors.

Keywords: Poverty, Charity, Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*, Victorian Literature

The responsibility for the poor has been an ongoing dispute between those of upper and lower classes for centuries. And when I say dispute, I am referring solely on the discrepancies of facts that the two groups hold to be true. Nonetheless, the role of caretaker varies among everyone's perception; especially when trying to identify if poverty is a problem of the state or of the people of London. As poverty and class struggle becomes an unresolved issue, and thus continues to expand, Charles Dickens uses his books to hint at this looming threat and addresses the problem the poor are facing. While many believe the state should intervene and reduce the amount of poor people, others are convinced it is the role of a society to help their fellow citizens. In this paper, I will examine at length how Dickens takes his London reality of impoverishment and shapes it into a context for all to digest. *A Christmas Carol* places the problem more so on the individual and provides an effective solution by the end of the text, which demonstrates how those in the community can alter the problem; on the other hand, he also subtly demonstrates how the environment reflects the state, and if those in charge are not trying to improve the situations of the poor, the citizens will have little concern for them as well. However, I am convinced that Dickens composes *A Christmas Carol* in the attempt to express to the individual it is their role and duty to generously contribute to those around them for the betterment of humanity on the basis

level, while the government should focus more on the larger picture and implement laws which will benefit all who are poverty-stricken. A solution to the problem always exists, but sometimes-willful blindness makes this difficult to acknowledge. The economic struggle limits the progression in life for multiple people, especially for the characters in Dickens's story, who are essentially people he has come across in his own life. While I argue that Dickens attributes the problem of poorness on both state and society, in *A Christmas Carol*, he concentrates more on the impact an individual can make via the character of Scrooge and how charity improves the life of those who need it through the image of Bob Cratchit.

Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* as a ghost story emphasizes the horrors the poor endure, and he calls upon those who believe it is not their problem to fix it. As the economy and environment continues to flourish so should the people, all people, dwelling there. Historically, ghost stories were told as part of the Christmas festivities, family members would gather around and recite tales that they heard in the attempt to frighten and bond. And the fickleness of money is frightening enough, since financial destruction could strike anyone, and at a moment's notice, any family could be subjected to loss of their wealth. While there are actual ghosts in this novel, adding more of an eerie element, the ghosts appear as the less terrifying thing. Although, they do startle Scrooge upon their first encounter, what scares him the most is dying without making a positive change and leaving his mark within his community. The spirits reveal to him that without his generosity he would die alone and forgotten, like those who are neglected by the state and their neighbors. This ghost story provides listeners and readers with the perspective of what it is like being poor and as Scrooge floats around he personifies this class, because he is: invisible in a room full of people, does not consume the food at the feasts he appears at, and he does not partake in the happiness of those who are in the spaces of good shelter and great feelings. The ghosts make Scrooge into an outcast like many lower-class people. These are all aspects that the poor face daily and charity during the season of Christmas would change this routine for multiple families by providing them with a little more than what the state gives them. Mainly because those who considered themselves working-class did not reside in poor houses long. Henry Mayhew writes in *London Labour and the London Poor*, "My informant tells me that persons of this class (working class) seldom return to the workhouse after one night's shelter, and this is a conclusive proof that the regular workingman seldom passes into an habitual beggar. They are an entirely distinct class, having different habits, and indeed, different features, and I am assured that they are strictly honest" (Mayhew 1985, 374). Charity would not only benefit those who make it known that they need assistance, but also those whose pride will not let them beg or ask for help. When the state provides an individual with a resource to some it hinders their self-esteem, however, when a fellow neighbor shares their goods, it is seen as more brotherly and considerate of your associate. This is another example of how the state and society works hand in hand to contribute to those with little to no income. As Barbara Hanawalt states in *London's Poor*, "Charitable giving illustrates the spiritual bargain between the rich and poor in the salvation of the rich men's and women's souls and care for the poorer neighbors" (Hanawalt 2005, 1069).

In this text, charity is imperative in the economic sphere of survival and those who lack must depend on others' kindness to help them endure adversity. Poverty is the concern of the individual who passes by those in need on the streets and starve in the poorhouse, while the state regulates the laws to ensure proper housing, work, and food. Even though it lacks the compassion found within an attentive person, the state has more control to execute a more practical modification. Since poorhouses cannot operate without money the taxes citizens pay become necessary to guarantee its proper running, yet taxes are not enough as opposed to Scrooge's opinion. Scrooge states to the men asking for charity,

'I wish to be left alone,' said Scrooge. Since you ask me what I wish, gentlemen, that is my answer. 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 (Dickens 2008, 14).

Here Scrooge talks about the tax money he gives to fund the prisons, Union workhouses, the Poor Law, and the Treadmill, which are all constructed by the state to eradicate some of the economic hardship; however, as the gentlemen communicate to Scrooge his small percentage is not enough. Scrooge, like many others in his community, feel as if it is not their responsibility to ease the sorrow of the less fortunate and that state subsidized assistance should suffice. This is not to say government instituted programs are wonderful, but rather their existence does solve some of the problems of hungry and shelter; and through my interpretation this is what Scrooge is hinting towards. Nonetheless, Dickens and others in his community would have been aware of the conditions of these state establishments. Many prisons were not funded sufficiently, meaning that the prisoners were placed in an even harsher environment than being a beggar on the street in some cases. Hanawalt writes, "Prisoners had to supply their own food and drink, as well as a mat for a bed and relief from fetters. Prison was an inhospitable place in which a prisoner might languish until a debt was paid or a person tried for a crime" (Hanawalt 2005, 1079). In other words, this thinking of those in need should rely more on the state's help than the help from a neighbor, becomes damaging. The State provides the occupants in the workhouses or prisons with the bare minimum, which means if an individual does not have it then it must come from the generosity of someone who has disposable income and a pure heart.

The individuals who believe that public assistance should only stem from those in authority, overlook the aspect of how each person assembles and make up the public. Completely removing poverty is a desirous aspiration, but majority of everyone is aware this will never happen, even in earlier London. Michael Katz writes in "Poorhouses and the Origins of the Public Old Age Home", "None of the poor law critics, it must be stressed, proposed to eliminate poverty. To most people of the time, the idea would have been preposterous. Even in America, the vast majority would have to scabble hard for a living. Nor was the issue redistributing wealth" (Katz 1984, 114). Poor laws were mainly used to regulate the crisis of starvation, not to eradicate it, deprivation and

the Christmas season epitomized the perfect time to implore the necessity of charity. While the holidays are times of good food and comfort to some, it reminds others of their hardships making it difficult to enjoy. It is strenuous to disregard that there are destitute beings in the world once an individual confronts the issue, which is what happens to the main character Scrooge. Scrooge represents the oppressor, visible through all aspects of time, via the identity of those who thrive on their greed and guilt. The wealthy can no longer ignore the cries of those beneath them and as the classes continue to widen, people must take on the responsibility to assure no one is forgotten. Ultimately, progression should not be limited to those who can afford it, but all individuals should have an equal opportunity and resources to adequate living. What I am saying here once again is that while poverty, fundamentally, may be the liability of the state, citizens and neighbors are at the foundation of support. The one cannot move without the other and I believe Dickens does a wonderful job in communicating this idea.

The complexity of this uncomfortable situation is that poverty lacks boundaries, not only are there men and women starving, but also their children. In the introduction to *A Christmas Carol and other Christmas Books* Robert Douglas-Fairhurst writes, “And how could Dickens’ middle-class readers be brought to realize that Ignorance and Want – ‘the meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish’ children who appear to Scrooge from beneath the robe of the Ghost of Christmas Present – were as much their responsibility as their own more pampered offspring?” (Dickens 2008, xvi). Those with money were not looked upon to completely rid their setting of famine and lack of resources, but they were expected to care. When readers first encounter Scrooge, he is more than just a grumpy, old man; he is inconsiderate and, for a lack of better words, disgusted by the less fortunate. As a man with money and the ability to share his wealth, when he chooses not to, we see how the individual transforms into the problem. This is meticulously depicted when the gentlemen collecting for charity petitions Scrooge’s involvement,

‘a few of us are endeavouring to raise a fund to buy the Poor some meat and drink and means of warmth. We choose this time, because it is a time, of all others, when Want is keenly felt, and Abundance rejoices. What shall I put you down for?’ ‘Nothing!’ Scrooge replied (Dickens 2008, 14).

Scrooge’s inability to recognize how his contempt towards the poor places them into more of a disadvantage during the Christmas season, which shapes this novel, because he is not the only character turning his back on his fellow brothers, he is a representation. It is during this time that people “want” more than normal, mainly because of the surplus of food that others acquire and throw away. If the poor were to go without food and shelter year-round, then it would be appropriate to accommodate their needs during the season of brotherly love. The gentlemen here are demonstrating a resolution to the problem. By going out and working on behalf of the poor they give a voice to the voiceless while making more people aware of the devastating reality of their own environment.

Christmas time is received in this novel as a time of merriment and abundance; therefore, this overflow of food and cheer motivates some to spread their excess to all who may require a little

benevolence. The desire to want to share any extra nutrition should have been one that was quickly acted upon, considering that many of those who were hungry did in fact work, but they just did not make enough to buy meals for their family. As *The Song of the Lower Class* goes written by Ernest Jones, Chartist,

We plough and sow – we're so very, very low,
That we delve in the dirty clay,
Till we bless the plain with the golden grain,
And the vale with the fragrant hay.
Our place we know, we're so very low,
'Tis down at the landlord's feet:
We're not too low the bread to grow,
But too low the bread to eat (Pritchard 2003, 146).

To start, Chartism was a working-class movement in Britain for political movement and Ernest Jones was labeled as a chartist. In the longer song of the lower class, it discusses many issues that the workers have to face, and jobs they have to complete but never benefit from. As described in a portion of this song, the unfairness of poverty is mainly divided between those with a title and those without one. Lower class individuals were often susceptible to ill treatment simply because they lacked a voice and representation. Food is an important aspect of survival and making sure neighboring families had enough nourishment was solved in *A Christmas Carol* via Scrooge sharing food and wealth with his own community. While Scrooge has the luxury to deny himself a proper meal, many others did not. Either they had to eat the gruel that was served to them in workhouses and prisons, or they had to stretch the small amount of edible consumption in their own home.

Scrooge embodies one aspect of a grudgingly society, there are multiple characters who portray a warm and gleeful side of gratitude, such as his nephew. His nephew represents the image of a person who is concerned about the wellbeing of others regardless of if he has a little or a lot to give. As he drops by to wish his uncle good wishes and extend his hospitality, readers recognize the juxtaposition within their family and the reflection it has on the environment. It is obvious that Scrooge has a negative depiction about the Christmas season, seeing as those he pays taxes to the State, which in return are supposed to take care of the criminals and the needy; yet, during this period he is requested to personally contribute to his money to those charities who are going beyond their duty as a citizen and showing amiable affection to all. However, his nephew displays little concern about the monetary value associated with Christmas or economic gain in general. He expresses his financial circumstances to his uncle,

'There are many things from which I might have derived good, by which I have not profited, I dare say,' returned the nephew. 'Christmas among the rest. But I am sure I have always thought of Christmas time, when it comes round – apart from the veneration due to its sacred name and origin, if anything belonging

to it can be apart from that – as a good time; a kind, forgiving, charitable, pleasant time; the only time I know of, in the long calendar of the year, when men and women seem by one consent to open their shut-up hearts freely, and to think of people below them as if they really were fellow-passengers to the grave, and not another race of creature bound on other journeys' (Dickens 2008, 12).

Unconvinced by his nephew's speech, Scrooge does not see others on the street as his nephew does, but he views them as lazy for not being able to provide an ample amount of resources to ensure their progress in life. While Scrooge's nephew discusses how all should perceive the season of Christmas, Dickens subtly addresses what is wrong within his community. The solution to end poverty does not exist, yet for a split second, scarcity of food, warmth and shelter can fade via the participation of public serving and sharing. Nonetheless, Scrooge's nephew demonstrates an all too vivid picture of most of the society only being worried about his or herself, as they pass one another on the street and view them as strangers, rather than companions. Fred talks about how Christmas time is a period of pleasantries and good spirits, and he tries his best to illustrate this image to his uncle. He also brings out the fact that this is the only time of the year where men and women would opt to give more and receive in exchange. Even though, Fred does not benefit financially from his giving he obtains something better, which is the gratitude from others and the ability to share his kindness. This is even evident with his uncle; he continuously shows him love and concern and Scrooge does not reciprocate this until the end of the story.

Set during the season of feasts and consumption, eating was a way to share cheerfulness and appreciation. An excess amount of food would remain uneaten, and the overflow would be wasted. However, everyone did not have this lavishness and their food meant more to them than gaiety. It solidified their dependence upon one another and strengthened their connection as shown by the narrator,

Eked out by apple-sauce and mashed potatoes, it was a sufficient dinner for the whole family; indeed, as Mrs. Cratchit said with great delight (surveying one small atom of a bone upon the dish), they hadn't ate it all at last! Yet every one had had enough, and the youngest Cratchits in particular, were steeped in sage and onion to the eyebrows! (Dickens 2008, 51).

Food was a necessity, yet it did not come as easy to those as it did others. Some, like the Cratchits, had to work long hours and stretch food among a multitude of people, while wealthier people were able to squander their substances. James Henderson writes in "Political Economy is a Mere Skeleton Unless...", "Dickens opposed the Malthusian population doctrine claim that the population would soon outstrip the food supply. He (Dickens) sought to demonstrate that the problem was not an inadequate supply of food, but the way food was distributed among the people" (Henderson 2000, 144). Most of the time those who were hungry, were not victims of complete starvation, but they did fall casualty to not receiving enough to satisfy or sustain them. Dickens reveals this through the character of Tiny Tim, the small Cratchit boy who is weak physically,

but maintains a strong spiritual mindset. While this family was happy to have enough food to feed everyone until they were content, it must be reminded that this was the Christmas season, and all families try to provide more food than usual during this time. Which is to say, having a surplus of food may not be the case for the Cratchits throughout the rest of the year. It is hard to imagine someone starving while food is being wasted at a Christmas dinner/party, but that was and is the reality of life. The workingman had to work to make a significant difference in his life and sometimes they were not as fortunate as Bob Cratchit. Bob is a character which people can find a piece of Dickens within, he makes the most of what he has and eventually it pays off.

Starvation was something many people faced and only through the state or consideration of another citizen would those who were hungry be fed. Tara Moore writes, “Starving Victorian could not hope to consume the standard Christmas fare unless they applied for charity. Some went to the workhouse, where, by the 1840s, the culture’s sensitivity to Christmas benevolence had so softened the Guardians that they began providing just enough ritual food for a one-day ‘feast’” (Moore 2008, 498). Food plays an important role for the Cratchits because it is the one thing that they have control over. But as Moore points out many people counted on charity to help them eat a decent meal, especially at Christmas. As stated before, those in need of an extra penny for a meal would not have been someone who did not work to try to increase their income. Some families were more well off than other families and at a season filled with festivities and gatherings a small paycheck just did not go very far; therefore, they required a little more assistance to satisfy their needs. Although, readers did not encounter any truly starving people in *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens does make it obvious that there are those who are in the community with empty bellies and their hand out.

As it seems that charity and poverty coincide with one another, this text draws the distinction between the two. The juggling of who is responsible for the poor is explained in a way that splits the accountability. While the State should ensure the conditions of the lower class are civilized, the individuals of the middle and higher class should also show interest in making sure these duties are fulfilled. The voice of the lower class is one that is not heard and/or not respected; on the other hand, the opinion of someone with status could disrupt the inequality. The Ghost of Christmas Present states, “‘There are some upon this earth of yours,’ returned the Spirit, ‘who lay claim to know us, and who do their deeds of passion, pride, ill-will, hatred, envy, bigotry, and selfishness in our name, who are as strange to us and all our kith and kin, as if they had never lived. Remember that, and charge their doings on themselves, not us’” (Dickens 2008, 48). Charity and poverty are class struggles and it symbolizes Marx’s idea of the bourgeoisie and the working class, simply put, those who have the money and work to give versus those who need the money and work to live. Charity is the additional aid in providing for inhabitants of the city through the humanity of their fellow residents. When the government neglects to make a positive change and when the poor cannot improve their situation, charity steps in as a spare means of support.

The idea of the poor improving their own lives is a view Dickens had and placed in Scrooge. Coming from a background of low income, Dickens transforms himself into financial prosperity;

therefore, he can consume mass amounts of wealth while others struggle, because they too had the same ability to change their fate as he did. While he personally sympathizes with the way the government fails to assist the poor, he demonstrates in this book that the poor must work hard to secure their own fate, i.e., the hardworking, unfortunate Bob Cratchit. Monroe Engel writes, "But charity seemed to Dickens far more certainly a boon for the giver than for the receiver. He believed in self-help and independence, and even perhaps in the salutary effect of work. He was a hard as well as vulnerable man who had pulled himself up with the aid of a great talent, to be sure, but also by terrible determination and labor; and he expected other people to exert themselves also" (Engels 1956, 962-963). It was up to the individual to go to work at the factory, endure the tough poor laws and eventually escape from the grasp of prosperity. Dickens uses his talent as a writer and turned that into a source of income and he believed every person had some sort of talent they could convert into currency. This explains Scrooge's disdain for helping those whom he believes does not even try to help themselves. His tax money that goes into keeping the jails and factories running seem to provide more assistance to the poor than anything, in his judgment, but this could not be more wrong. Dickens uses the cruelty of the jail to reflect the attitude of those who do not care, Scrooge shows no concern for those in government establishments and neither does those in leadership positions. Most prisons were run with a lack of quality, and it is because people, like Scrooge, did not worry about the people in them. Nevertheless, this paper will show how Dickens resembles the character of Cratchit more than Scrooge.

This brings us to the character of Bob Cratchit, the poor working man, who despite his situation continues to have a hopeful outlook on life. Although he and his family do not dwell in the poorhouse, their house can be classified as a poor house. Cratchit makes little to nearly not enough money to comfortably support all his children and his wife; however, this does not discourage them from living their life. The text states,

They were not a handsome family; they were not well dressed; their shoes were far from being water-proof; their clothes were scanty; and Peter might have known, and very likely did, the inside of a pawnbroker's. But they were happy, grateful, pleased with one another, and contented with the time; and when they faded, and looked happier yet in the bright sprinklings of the Spirit's torch at parting (Dickens 2008, 54).

The narrator displays the financial weight that is on the Cratchit as the description of their clothes are told. Even though they were not living in a workhouse or on the street, they were still a family in need of a loving gesture. It is a painful situation to witness those who are barely making it, struggle to retain a positive perspective on life. But this is this the modesty that lies inside those who are in an unfavorable position. Bob would be one of the individuals who Mayhew talks about, that would not openly ask for charity even though he needed it, this highlights his dedication to make a change for himself. Bob Cratchit is like Charles Dickens in the mirroring of their persistence. Cratchit goes to work every day for a cruel man and does his job, he uses his meekness to counter

the coldhearted Scrooge and eventually it pays off. Here we have a poor man that works hard and brings himself out of poverty, while Scrooge generously helps in financially, he also starts to earn a better wage that improves his family's condition. Scrooge states at the close of the text,

‘A merrier Christmas, Bob, my good fellow, than I have given you for many a year! I’ll raise your salary, and endeavour to assist your struggling family, and we will discuss your affairs this very afternoon, over a Christmas bowl of smoking bishop, *Bob!’ (Dickens 2008, 83).

When the government neglects to improve the status of Cratchit's wellbeing, the kindness of Scrooge steps in and provides better working conditions and income to his employee. Scrooge makes it his duty to help Cratchit once he is confronted with the reality that poverty can affect the person right next to you. His personal experience of seeing someone suffer creates a reaction in him, which hopefully ignites inspiration within others who are faced with the decision to make a difference and not aid in the downfall of humanity. Alexander Welsh writes in *Satire and History: The City of Dickens*, “It has been argued that Dickens, vividly sensitive to class differences because of his own childhood, could not fully sympathize with the poor until he was sure that he could be no longer identified with them; alternatively, that he only gradually perfected a technique of symbolic implication that enabled him to deal imaginatively with the entire city” (Welsh 1968, 393). The anxiety that poverty could strike anyone is one that Dickens was aware of and while writing *A Christmas Carol* he makes sure to include this voice of uncertainty. This is what is horrifying, this is what makes the story uncanny. The ghostly fact remains that wages are intangible and while an individual may be at work one day, they could be in the workhouse the next. Life is constantly shifting for all and in a time where the city is experiencing modernization it was easy to fall behind, economically, and socially. Therefore, the character of Cratchit is similar to Dickens, they both know the experiences of hardships and they worked hard to place themselves in a better situation.

In his own experience, Dickens went from poverty to fortune through the skills of his writing. Familiar with the workhouses and prisons, Dickens writes to reform the very establishments that were a part of his childhood. He sees the tragedy around him and turns it into an art to be consumed by those who may not know the struggle he knew and that many other people went through. Ann Mackenzie writes in, *An Analysis of Environmental Issues in 19th Century England Using the Writings of Charles Dickens*, “At the time of this writing, Dickens became totally committed to sanitary conditions, especially among the poor. Since his childhood was marred with poverty after his father went to debtor's prison, he was dedicated to improving the conditions of the poor” (MacKenzie 2008, 202). Dickens knew first-hand about the tragedies that existed in his world and his novels make others aware of the problems as well. In his dedication to improving the lives of the poor, Dickens creates the model character Fred, Scrooge's nephew, who stands in the middle of both the poor and the state.

While Fred is not the wealthiest person in the story, he is not in an impoverished situation.

Fred is the citizen all people should strive to mirror, an individual who keeps good spirits and encourages others to do the same. This person in the middle is in the best position to lobby for the poor and be their voice to speak to the government. Fred creates a space for his uncle to realize how wonderful of a position he is through showing him his content with his own circumstances. Steven Marcus writes in *Homelessness and Dickens*, “We can also say that poverty, poor relief, pauperism, and homelessness were inseparably intertwined and were thought of throughout the period as central and indeed symbolic matters, that they were always surrounded with controversy, and that they were regarded regularly, but with fluctuating degrees of urgency, as leading phenomena in what was at the time considered the wealthiest society in the modern world” (Marcus 1991, 93). Dickens depicts Fred in an open environment where he could help those who are less fortunate than him and even though readers do not witness him giving to the poor, it is hard to speculate that he would not help those in need based off his personality. Besides the ghosts, Fred opens Scrooge’s eyes to see the flaw in his thinking and shows him the rational side of giving.

Nonetheless on the opposite side of my argument Andrew Smith writes, “The tale suggests that Scrooge needs to develop a form of social conscience that is generated through a rediscovered compassion for others. However, society is not transformed in this moment but merely re-interpreted as a set of unresolved problems which compassion identifies but can only partially alleviate. To some degree that is to assert a commonplace criticism of Dickens; namely that he is better at identifying social problems than he is at formulating solutions to them” (Smith 2005, 40). As I do agree with Smith’s analysis that compassion does not fix the entire problem, I do believe that Dickens does provide readers with a solution to the social problem in his text. This supports my claim that society must assist in providing for those who are hungry or homeless, but ultimately it is the state that must enforce laws that will guarantee the improvement on welfare. Dickens, in my opinion, does a wonderful and thorough job in illustrating how one person can begin to correct an issue and develop a lasting impact that builds up others. Although, Smith makes a very compelling argument there are many things I disagree with in his article as far as his view on the success Dickens achieves in combating the problem he introduces. Smith continues to write, “The tale suggests that Scrooge cannot provide the solution to the problem which he has helped to create. Charity is not the real answer” (Smith 2005, 43). Charity is not the only answer, but it is where the resolution starts. Scrooge recognizes his error and takes the right steps to change life for himself and those around him. Smith connects his study with Marxism and capitalism, this is a fine strategy seeing as though this text deals a lot with: the economy, those who have money, and those who do not.

Throughout this paper two types of people who use charity have been examined, those who are in a dire need and those who need just a little kindness to help. Although the state helps those in extreme cases, if one can call the government’s intervention help and I would not label it as the best answer, those who require a small pick me up can benefit from their neighbors and fellow citizens’ affection. Even though there were two types of charity, the poverty group was strategically left ambiguous for the most part to symbolize anyone could become part of this bracket. Scrooge

travels in and out of time to view the different stages of economy that people can belong to and how they are affected. The ghosts of capitalism, to use Smith's ideas, allows Scrooge to see how children are affected through his own childhood, how those who are related to him are affected, and how men and women unconnected to him are also affected. Men, women, and children are all transformed in some way based off the decisions of the authority involving money, whether they are altered in a good or bad way mainly depends on the class they belong to. More than likely, those of lower classes will be exposed to harder times than the middle and higher classes, especially living in the city. It was easy to become a product of a failing society without the right guidance and support, and this could be from a knowledgeable neighbor or an involved community leader.

Towards the end of the novel readers receive relief from Scrooge's transformation from merciless to understanding. The ghosts physically remove him from his luxury and places him inside the harsh reality of his city, similarly to what Dickens does to his readers. In both situations the needs of a thriving society must be confronted and reformed. Charity will not solve the issue of poverty, but it does show that people care about the matter. Which is what Michael Grogan states in *Generosity and the Ghosts of Poor Laws Passed*, and I believe it is worth quoting at length, "Though proof of Scrooge's reform at the end of the narrative is in the pudding of material giving, nephew Fred's emphasis at the beginning is on a communal, consensual, 'free' opening of the heart, an expansion of the imagination to see those who are in reality 'below' as 'fellow', bound on the same journey. A society divided through 'the long calendar of the year' by class into racial strata is magically, at Christmas, made whole in the spirit of a giving that, outside the economic circle, profits no one but does everyone good" (Grogan 2004, 155). A weak society can only create a weak government, if those who are living side by side do not come together for a specific cause, then the government will overlook the wrongs as well. No one should be able to enjoy a feast, while there are those who are hungry. Dickens identifies the problem he saw growing in his community and he addresses it in his Christmas ghost story. Presenting it in a way that everyone could relate to it, he makes poverty accessible to everybody. A person does not have to be poor to understand the hardships that come along with being lower class. In a community all should be responsible for each other, as expressed in *A Christmas Carol*. If we expect the Government to function properly and work for the public, we must first hold ourselves accountable. Poverty and charity are both elements of the people and it is up to the public to make a difference and for the government to implement a change.

Charles Dickens composes a short narrative full of ghosts and regrets to be easily recited to family members during the season's gathering period. Although concise, this tale includes multiple call for actions on the theme of poverty and charity. One of the best ways for an individual to escape the narrow clutches of poverty is through receiving charity from the grace of someone who has it to give. As most people would disagree about the idea of charity being a reasonable solution to poverty, I would like to reiterate that this is where I believe the solution to the problem should start, in the homes of those who dwell in the city. For those in charge to care, other people must

first show that they care and draw attention to things that are being neglected and mismanaged.

Both the city and the state must take on the responsibility of attending to the impoverished. As the city becomes more modernized the state should equip every community with the proper tools to compete, whether that is: decent education, appropriate nutrition, or suitable housing; nonetheless, it is up to everyone to advantage of the opportunities presented to them and to use them effectively. Scrooge, Fred, and Bob Cratchit all represent the same side of the coin, they are members of the community and despite their financial statuses it is up to them to demonstrate order and fellowship before asking the law to do so. *A Christmas Carol* should frighten anyone who reads it on the reality of capitalism and teach them that the actions of one individual can initiate a movement.

How Can You Eat at A Time Like This is meant to shed light on the changes Dickens is calling for in his own writing. Like Dickens, I point out the problem and then show the solution to help resolve the matter. Those of higher classes should help by reaching down to those below them in any way possible and bring them up to speed. By ensuring equality among all classes is what Dickens strives to achieve in his writing. Growing up he was no stranger to hard times and struggle, which makes this ghost story more relatable. Dickens has connections to both classes, the poor and the wealthy, and it shows how both rely on the other to thrive. Thrive in the sense, that their existence depends on the presence of the other, there is no upper class without the lower class and vice versa. Factors such as food and shelter should be rationed in a way that it supplies everyone's needs. Those with a surplus of food must retain an awareness that their over consumption could harm individuals who do not have anything to eat. Although, it is not their place to make sure everyone is well fed, they should try to make sure their neighbors have enough before overindulging.

A Christmas Carol is bigger than Christmas, because charity is what is most important during the season of giving. Poverty will not disappear overnight, but charity will help deplete the amount of people who are victims to it. The self-recognition that one person can make a difference is epitomized in Scrooge, and while the mean old man believes the poor should work hard to pull themselves out of despair, he soon realizes that he should provide assistance to their cause. If all people are at the bottom of the chain, then they must all link together to rise to the top, regardless of class and status. Change must start at a common place before those who lack commonality become emotionally invested, the community must recognize that they are one from various backgrounds and that the government has a duty to protect and serve them all.

Upon further investigation I would like to develop more this idea of charity and donations to the prisons. Dickens had a strong connection to prisons and workhouses, and I believe it is worth analyzing how money given from their community could better shape the state ran institution. Since he would not have been a stranger to the horrors that goes on inside of prisons and knew the reason many people went to debtor's prison; it would be interesting to incorporate more research into how prisons should belong more to the people and not the government, based

on how they were so poorly run by those of authority. In Dickens's writing those things which he is passionate about is clearly stated and it would do justice to discuss the matter of prisons and the influence it has on the poor, children, and the economy. When a problem exists within a community it becomes the problem of the people, one way or another, all the citizens will be affected by their neglect to intervene on the behalf of those not able. In the attempt to provide a solution to the problem Dickens creates this story in such a way that all could envision themselves in this situation. The person in the next house could be struggling and the one way to help them out is through charity. The smallest acts of kindness should not go unnoticed, because at the end it is the person who least suspects that they can make a difference who does.

References

- Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Engel, Monroe. "The Politics of Dickens' Novels." *PMLA* 71. 5 (1956): 945–974.
- Grogan, Michael. "Generosity and the Ghosts of Poor Laws Passed." *Narrative*, 12. 2 (2004): 151–166.
- Hanawalt, Barbara A. "Reading the Lives of the Illiterate: London's Poor." *Speculum* 80. 4 (2005): 1067–1086.
- Henderson, James P. "Political Economy Is a Mere Skeleton Unless...': What Can Social Economists Learn From Charles Dickens?." *Review of Social Economy* 58. 2 (2000): 141–151.
- Katz, Michael B. "Poorhouses and the Origins of the Public Old Age Home." *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly. Health and Society* 62. 1 (1984): 110–140.
- MacKenzie, Ann Haley, and Charles Dickens. "An Analysis of Environmental Issues in 19th Century England Using the Writings of Charles Dickens." *The American Biology Teacher* 70. 4 (2008): 202–204.
- Marcus, Steven. "Homelessness and Dickens." *Social Research* 58. 1 (1991): 93–106.
- Mayhew, Henry. *London Labour and the London Poor*. London: Penguin Books, 1985.
- Moore, Tara. "Starvation in Victorian Christmas Fiction." *Victorian Literature and Culture* 36. 2 (2008): 489–505.
- Pritchard, R. E. *Dickens's England: Life in Victorian Times*. Westport: Praeger, 2003.
- Smith, Andrew. "Dickens' Ghosts: Invisible Economies and Christmas." *Victorian Review* 31. 2 (2005): 36–55.
- Welsh, Alexander. "Satire and History: The City of Dickens." *Victorian Studies* 11. 3 (1968): 379–400.