

The Analysis of Charles Dickens' Novel A Christmas Carol——From the Essence of the Novel to Western Culture

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Abstract. This paper takes a thorough analysis of Charles Dickens' work A Christmas Carol from the essence of the novel to western culture demonstrated in work. Through the analysis, three essences of the novel such as Christmas spirit and humanitarianism, two sides of human being and the importance of making choices are concluded. Besides, the influence of western culture also permeates through the novel. From the analysis of this novel, it can be seen that as long as we are helpful, kind and benevolent, we will bring ourselves and others unlimited happiness.

Introduction

A Christmas Carol, created in 1843, is one of the five Christmas books by the greatest representative of English Critical Realism— Charles Dickens. The other four books are “The Chimes, The Cricket on the Hearth, The Battle of Life and The Haunted Man”. (Liu Bingshan, 2001: 347) Though they are not so famous as his other works: David Copperfield , A Tale of Two Cities and Great Expectation and so on, they possess a profound symbolic meaning and promote the development of Christmas which can be seen more obviously in A Christmas Carol. Therefore Dickens is honored as the man who invented Christmas. The novel tells us such a story: Scrooge, a rich but cool, stingy, and selfish man, is visited by three Christmas spirits on Christmas night. The three spirits help him to see his past, present and future. They make him realize the happiness of giving and what will happen in the future if he does not change himself. They make him reconsider the meaning of life. In the mean while, the three spirits also help him to dig out the other side of his nature: Sympathetic, kind and benevolent.

Writing Background

A Christmas Carol falls into the second period of Dickens' creation. Between 1842 and 1858, he visited some Capitalist countries, such as America and Italy. Before his visit Dickens thought of the United States as a world in which there were no class divisions and the relations between men were humanitarian. But when he was actually there what impressed him most there were the rule of dollars and the enormously corrupting influence of wealth and power. Vulgar selfishness prevailed everywhere and concealed the fine qualities of the people. “Dickens' native optimism about Capitalist Society was thus profoundly shaken”. (Liu Bingshan, 2001: 345) This shock stung him into writing American Notes, which was also the turning point of his writing. He began to realize that the brightness of Capitalism started to be covered with shadows; the benevolence of the capitalists started to be replaced by their cruelty and coldness. The miserable and hard life of people stimulates Dickens to write more stories. In addition, the life experiences of Dickens also contribute a lot to his writing of this book. He was born in 1812; his father was an ordinary Navy clerk. In 1821, he was transferred to London with his family, where his father was helplessly in debts. Losing financial support because of his father's being in custody, Dickens had to rely on himself. With the help of a relative, he found a job pasting labels on bottles in a blacking warehouse. His living condition was so tragic that he was poorly clothed, ill fed, forced to lodge in the cheapest

shelter, and to be mingled with the roughest and toughest companions from ghettos and slums. The taste of bitter life made Charles Dickens unable to forget his sufferings even when he was already a man of great success. No wonder that Charles Dickens showed great concern for the people in poverty in his later works. Here, the poor maybe refer to the people who are poor not only materially but also morally. From the moral changing of Scrooge in A Christmas Carol, we can see Dickens has made a great effort to save people's soul and to promote his humanitarian ideal which can also be seen in his other works. In a word, the humanitarian outlook permeates through almost each of his literary works.

The Essence of A Christmas Carol

Christmas Spirit and Humanitarianism

At present, Christmas is celebrated as the most significant festival in the western world like China's New Year. It is not only a festival of England but of the whole world. Its value doesn't lie in the festival itself but in what it conveys and transmits---the Christmas Spirit. Just as Scrooge's nephew said, it is a time to be with family and friends, and to be generous to the poor. It is the only time of the year when men and women are happy to open their hearts and be joyful. It means showing your charity to the poor without asking for return, bringing happiness and bless to everyone without complaining, talking openly and freely with others without thinking too much. It also means expressing your affection and gentleness to the person you love without hesitating. The center of Christmas Spirit is humanitarianism. We can take advantage of humanitarianism to eliminate hatred; we can use it to love, to forgive others. We can also use it to alleviate and remove the conflict between different social classes. Christmas Spirit promotes that people should be tolerant and respectful with each other: the poor should not lose their personality and dignity, while the rich should not lose their generosity and they should treat the poor kindly and respectfully.

Two sides of human being

Christianity holds that human beings are originally sinful, while Buddhism holds that human beings are originally kind, others hold the idea that human beings are the combination of the two. Whether a person is kind or not can not be determined when they are born. It depends on many other influences, such as the surrounding environment of a person, the social and family influence on him; and even a smallest alteration may affect a person. The result of these influences is that he may become a person who can bring great benefit to society or, evil. Scrooge in A Christmas Carol is once a lovely and active young man who carries the Christmas spirit with him, but as he grows up, some bad things contaminate his mind: the lust for money and position changes him into another man. Gradually, he becomes selfish, cruel, stingy and unhappy, he even does not have belief in his mind except in money, but he himself does not realize that, because he is already accustomed to that. The evilness in his nature has become stronger day by day. But if somebody put a mirror in front of him, and let him see himself – his memory of past happiness, his cruelty to others, others happiness under poverty and the inevitable result of his evil character, he would be totally shocked and frightened, and would be able to alter himself. The mirror in the novel is the three Ghosts which are one part of religious culture. They help him to see his other sides which could bring him happiness and blessings for the rest of his life. Human beings in reality are the same, with goodness and evil in our nature. What we need to do is to extinguish the evil aspect of our mind and activate the good aspect which will bring us unlimited happiness.

The importance of making choices

Making choices is an essential part of human beings' life. The choices that you are going to make will determine your future to a certain extent; it will influence your position, your state of mind, your personality and many other aspects. It will decide whether you will be loved or not, be respected or not, be praised or not. In A Christmas Carol, Scrooge once gives up his girlfriend and his good nature for money. However, does he get true happiness? When he sees his girlfriend's happiness, when he sees poor people's happiness, he knows what he got is only loneliness, coldness, ignorance and the loss of friends. There is no doubt that Scrooge's employee Bob is poor, but is he with his family members deprived of happiness due to lacking money? No. On the contrary, their

happiness is even envied by the rich. Hence, if there are two choices in front of you, which one would you like to choose, money or happiness? Of course, the right of choosing is up to you. But what we can ensure is that money can buy you a bed, but not sleep; a clock, but not time; sex but not love; money can buy you insurance but not safety; blood but not life. Here happiness possesses more meanings than itself. It is an assertion that most people can accept and support. Therefore, when Scrooge is taken by the Ghost of Christmas Present to see different people's happiness, poor and rich, at every corner of the world on Christmas Day, he is deeply moved by these scenes. Only at this moment does he realize what the feeling of true happiness is and how powerful it is. Therefore, at last he chooses happiness instead of money. Making correct choices is important, difficult as it may be. But do remember no matter what kind of choices you are going to make, you should be responsible for yourself, and make sure that it will make you happy for the rest of your life.

Western Culture and A Christmas Carol

Western Culture behind A Christmas Carol

There should be a belief in everybody's heart. Any progressive idea can be called belief as long as it benefits people and the whole society. Many of Dickens' works are created by making use of people's belief in God. An American writer once mentioned that among all the writers whose name we can speak, Dickens is the only one who let us see clearly the spirit of Christmas, the only one who let us know the greatness of people's imagination which can make people respect and admire God sincerely, even though we never meet God. Dickens' point of view is like this: "the guidance of the Christ is simple but abundant, the model of Christ is sanctuary, and the whole life of Christ is perfect". (Yan Xingzhi, 2004) He believes in the function of Christianity in purifying people's mind and promoting people's moral standard. Meanwhile, In Christianity, there are many religious theories from which Dickens got lots of benefits. Such as, the theory that every individual has soul, that body and soul can be separated and soul will be eternal; the theory that there are also other spirits in this world: they are the holy spirits who control some events in people's life; the theory that all human beings' behavior will cast shadows in the material world. Without these theories, some of the plots in A Christmas Carol may seem to be a little ridiculous. For instance, the appearance of Marley's ghost; the helpful action of the three spirits to Scrooge and the retrospect of Scrooge's past life with the help of the Ghost of Christmas Past. Hence, the doctrine of Christianity inspires Dickens to write A Christmas Carol from which the Christmas spirit will be spread out and people's confusion and bewilderment will be revealed. Here, Dickens takes religious culture as his weapon to expose and attack the evil nature of human beings and the wrongs they do to people at the bottom of the society. "Culture, as the original symbol of a nation or the deep mental structure of a person, is an essential language to a nation. Because it is such a language that it can gather people break through darkness". (Darl, 1994: 15) As a matter of fact, some doctrine of Christianity such as "be sure your sin will find you out, Virtue will triumph in the long run ", do serve as a tool for some writers to expose the sinful nature of human beings. Therefore, Dickens just takes advantage of this special language to transmit his humanitarian outlook.

Western Culture seen in A Christmas Carol

Firstly, religious culture can be seen in A Christmas Carol. At the very beginning of the novel, the story tells us that Marley's ghost comes back with heavy chains on his body, which is just in accordance with the doctrine of Christianity that "be sure your sin will find you out". The ghost of Marley denoted that God has punished him because of some wrongs he did when he was alive. In addition, the doctrine of salvation of Jesus Christ can also be seen in A Christmas Carol. The three spirits and Scrooge's nephew Fred-- a generous and benevolent young man are the prototype of Jesus Christ, While Scrooge and those who carry the same characteristic with him are the object of their salvation. Besides, we can also see the doctrine of resurrection in his novel: The story concludes with a satisfying ending that Scrooge has changed himself and his soul has been saved by Cod. We can see his resurrection through his conversation with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to

Come, “Good spirit, your nature intercedes for me, and pities me. Assure me that I yet may change these shadows you have shown me, by an altered life, I will honor Christmas in my heart, and try to keep it all the year. I will live in the Past, the present, and the future. The Spirit of all three shall strive within me. I will not shut the lessons that they teach. Oh, tell me I may sponge away the writing on this stone!”(Charles Dickens, 2004:128)

Secondly, Christmas culture is seen in *A Christmas Carol*. The happy atmosphere before Christmas, the joyful songs of the poor children, the charitable action of some charity organizations, and the pudding and goose at the Christmas table are all scenes of Christmas. Besides, the appearance of the Ghost of Christmas Present resembles Santa Clause which can be seen in the following description: “It was clothed in one simple green robe, or mantle, bordered with white fur. This garment hung so loosely on the figure that its capacious breast was bare, as if disdaining to be warder or concealed by any artifice. Its feet, observable beneath the ample folds of the garment, were also bare; and on its head it wore no other covering than a holly wreath, set here and there with no shining icicles. Its dark brown curls were long and free: free as its genial face, its sparkling eye, its open hand, its cheery voice, its unconstrained demeanor, and its joyful air.” (Charles Dickens, 2004:66) From this description, we can see Christmas Culture does appear in *A Christmas Carol*.

The influence of A Christmas Carol on the culture of Christmas

In the Victorian Age when *A Christmas Carol* was published, the festival of Christmas was not well-known to many people. After it was published, some of the plots in the novel have become the conventional custom of Christmas, such as the gathering of family that “bound together all home enjoyments, affections and hopes.” which can be seen in Bob’s family and Fred’s family in *A Christmas Carol*; the turkey sent by Scrooge to his employee--Bob began to replace the traditional bony and greasy goose as the center piece of the Christmas board. The Christmas tree also originates from this novel, “The walls and ceiling were so hung with living green, that it looked a perfect grove; from every part of which, bright gleaming berries glistened. The crisp leaves of holly, mistletoe, and ivy reflected back the light, as if so many little mirrors had been scattered there”.(Charles Dickens,2004:72) Even the greeting of “Merry Christmas” became popular since the publication of the novel. Today, many charity organizations will donate money to the poor and homeless at every Christmas. “Orphans hung their wishes on the ‘Angle Tree’, people put their love and concern into the ‘shoe Box’” ----(Kong Lixia, 2009) Every Christmas Day, the generous and benevolent people will bring their happy and joyful mood of Christmas to many families.

Conclusion

Besides the fantastic story itself, *A Christmas Carol* intends to teach us some morals. No matter how confused we are, how prejudiced we are, or how ignorant we are, as long as we have the courage to choose our lives again, we will have the power to change ourselves thoroughly. The spirit of Humanitarianism is hidden in everybody’s heart. As long as we dig it out and use it to console and help others, we will be a good man. Human beings are not born perfect; everybody has the right to make mistakes, as everybody gets the right to correct them. In *A Christmas Carol*, the transformation of Scrooge is due to the power of the ghosts, because ghosts have a great function in literary works. In Christianity, nothing can be as powerful as ghosts in persuading others to give up evil for good. Nobody likes to go to hell when they die. Therefore, they will try their best to behave themselves. It is the western culture employed in the novel that makes it develop naturally to the end. Meanwhile, the novel also promotes the development of Christmas culture.

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