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ENGL 4050 002

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### Charles Dickens: the Nightwalker and his Ghosts

Through the cold dark nights of winter, Charles Dickens walked with ghosts. Those cold walks through winter nights gave him enough material for his writings that made being at his desk a little more bearable. In the class discussion of Dickens's short essay "Night Walks", it was agreed that night offers a time of its own, a time where imaginations run wild conjuring up ghosts and other fantastical visions. Dickens certainly did so; he took his details from the night and wrote such fantastic scenes of ghosts. The night offers something darker, quite literally, which often offers a stark contrast to daylight when most people are awake. During the night, one needs to take extra precautions and be more alert, however, night is also the time of dreaming. Dickens wrote from this nocturnal realm about ghosts and the winter chill. Walking at night was a prominent part of his life, and these walks inspired many of the ghosts that he is frequently associated with.

Dickens surely did walk. He walked often and fast claiming that he clocked around four miles per hour and considering the math, his pace may have been even faster. Dickens wasn't kidding around when it came to walking. The website Kottke takes popular statistics of Charles Dickens and his average walk to present a fictitious tweet from him claiming, "My avg. daily fitbit #fitstats for last week 247,775 steps and 111.5 miles traveled." Far beyond the ten thousand steps that Fitbit sets as the default goal. Dickens preferred a good night walk, some of them stemming from "a temporary inability to sleep" according to "Night Walks", which set him about throughout the night on many occasions (1). According to Kottke, one famous walk clocked in

around thirty miles; overnight leaving his home in the London to make it in time for breakfast at his other home in Gad's Hill . In his writings you can see the results of his fast paced night walks. Dickens writes in scene from *A Christmas Carol* that every keyhole was affected by the fog. Upon reading this, I can only imagine that Charles Dickens went past each door to examine them, walking briskly though that foggy night. However, it is McKernan who writes that "It takes some sort of critical genius to understand Dickens' walking not to be observant in the conventional sense, but an act of dreaming. He walked not to see things but to get the sense of them." What he found out there after hours was certainly phantasmagoria.

Whether he created them for himself or saw them as he walked through the eerie nights of winter, Dickens surely knew how to capture the vision of a ghost. *A Christmas Carol* features Dickens's most well-known ghosts. As we walk along with Scrooge and the ghosts, we see each ghost is different from the rest, all representing something important and needing to be taught if Scrooge is to change his fate and afterlife. These ghosts range from lamenting souls clattering along with chains to one glowing brightly to another being so dark they blend into the night. First his late business partner, Marley comes to visit in hopes of inspiring Scrooge to change his fate so that he doesn't end up chained to his greed for all eternity as Marley is. He wears chains attached the locked cash boxes dragging at his feet, making such a commotion despite being an apparition (21). As Marley leaves, Scrooge watches ghosts of greedy men dragging the weights of their cash boxes on chains behind them as punishment for their lack of compassion (28). Scrooge then has visions of more ghosts and walks through the night with them, taking in the sights, sounds, and smells of Christmas. The first of the three is the Ghost of Christmas Past, who is beaming from his head to his feet in a glowing pillar of light (33), and shows Scrooge beautiful Christmases from his youth and reminding him of the merry in Merry Christmas. Next the Ghost of Christmas Present comes along, looking like Father Christmas with green robes

and a wreath around the crownline (53), to show Scrooge Christmases happening in the present without Scrooge, showing how people view him. This ghost gives Scrooge a warning that should things continue down this path - the path of Scrooge's greed - that Tiny Tim will not make it (64). By the time the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come shows up, Scrooge is quite shaken and the appearance of this ghost shakes him even more. Cloaked in such a dark garment that blended into the night, the only visible feature was his outstretched hand (79). These ghosts are how Dickens sees these messages he portrayed.

This story and its ghosts are quite possibly his most recreated works; with over twenty movies alone that recreated this work since 1910. The ghosts all come at different points in the night of one cold man in an attempt to change his heart. Saying Scrooge is a cold man is drawing directly from Dickens' own writing in *A Christmas Carol*. "The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue; and spoke out shrewdly in his grating voice." (8). A cold man by his face and his heart noting that "He carried his own low temperature always about with him; he iced his office in the dog-days; and didn't thaw it one degree at Christmas." (8). Not even a degree at Christmas to welcome in his nephew, no there was nothing warm about this man. Everything he did was symbolic of how cold he was down to his icy heart. Even though "External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge" (8), Dickens shows his own walking through the details surrounding this cold hearted man. Dickens certainly took enough walks in harsh winter weather to know how a person's body would change as the cold started to take its effect. He notes all the things that external cold does to a person's body such as stiffening their walk, freezing their features, or even reddening the eyes. Dickens knows the chill of the night.

Even pop culture features Charles Dickens out late with ghosts. When *Doctor Who* rebooted in 2005, Mark Gatiss wrote an episode featuring Charles Dickens, played by Simon

Callow, called "The Unquiet Dead". Dickens is portrayed as a brooding old man, late in his life and out of ideas, doomed to keep repeating himself onstage with his more famous stories. However, he is interrupted during his reading by a ghostly happenstance. Dickens then joins the famous time traveller, The Doctor, played by Christopher Eccleston, and his companion, Rose Tyler, played by Billie Piper, to discover that these ghosts are actually beings from another world; said "ghosts" are trying to live through the gas lights in the building and its surrounding areas. Dickens originally doubts what he is seeing despite it happening right in front of him. This is much like how Scrooge reacts when he is sitting across from the ghost of his late friend Marley. Eventually, he figures out that the gas lamps are the solution and floods the "ghosts" with gas to pull them out of the victims; ironically these lamps are similar to the ones that Dickens wrote about in *A Christmas Carol* to light Scrooge's front steps. By the end of the episode, Dickens has a new life in him and sets off walking through the streets saying Merry Christmas to everyone much like the end of *A Christmas Carol*.

According to the record of his life in *The Uncommercial Traveller and Other Papers*, Dickens spent much of his later years performing readings (xxxi-xxxiii) as he is shown in the episode and his line of "the same old show" rings out (7:20). However, the key line in this opening is at the 7:22 minute mark when Dickens claims, "I am a ghost, condemned myself to repeat myself through all eternity". Despite having a family, Dickens often travelled without them. His comment of being "clumsy with family matters" in the episode highlights this (7:02).

Even though he has a new life and energy by the end of the episode, The Doctor comments that Dickens will die the following year of 1970, staying true to fact (42:40). The end of Dickens life was still packed with walking wherever he could get it along his reading tours, but he was falling ill. He was urged by some friends to cancel some readings to slow down a bit, but this depressed Dickens more. They suggested a walking match between the three of them to

cheer him up, and it did exactly that. Merrell Noden reported in *Sports Illustrated* about this walking competition that Dickens was the “promoter, starter, pacesetter and self-appointed chronicler” of this brisk pace racing down Boston's Mill Dam Road. On top of the difficulty of the route itself, the area got hit by plenty of snow the night before their race. The three walked on through the course with Dickens leading until about halfway where he dropped out due to his health.

According to the blurb he added to *The Franklin Library* collection, Charles Dickens wanted his ghosts to stay with us. He penned, “I have endeavoured in this Ghostly little book, to raise the Ghost of an Idea, which shall not put my readers out of humour with themselves, with each other, with the season, or with me. May it haunt their house pleasantly, and no one wish to slay it.” (5). He hoped that people would read his stories and be remembered. Certainly The Doctor was right so far in saying that his books would last forever (42:15). From remakes to special printings, Charles Dickens remains a common name on bookshelves everywhere. May he always be remembered as the man who could not keep still, walking through the nights with his ghosts to accompany him, the only ones who could keep up.

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