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## **A Bleak Christmas**

Charles Dickens uses examples of poor, illiterate, working children in *Bleak House* and *A Christmas Carol*, which were both influenced by his reading of The Parliamentary Papers: Children's Employment Commission Reports, as touching examples to urge the literate public to enact much needed reforms to existing systems of inequality between classes; and to improve the lives of suffering children in nineteenth century England. Using *A Christmas Carol* and the *CECR* as secondary texts informs and enhances the reading of *Bleak House*, as it relates to the plight of poor, illiterate, working children. The comparisons reveal Dickens as an activist social reformer intent on bringing about social change at the time he wrote *A Christmas Carol*, ten years before *Bleak House*.

Mr. Dickens reveals his thoughts on reform differently in each work. One novel examines social conditions at an individual level, while the other addresses the whole social system. One reveals itself as a child-friendly, humorous, Christmas ghost tale, with happy endings and an obvious moral to try to be more childlike in our view of the world. The other seethes with complex, multifaceted, political, and legal thrills. Death, characters, and mysteries abound in both novels. They also accomplish the common goal of bringing awareness of social issues to people who can read, who are then able to enact positive change, for poor children, in their society.

Dickens reading of the *Children's Employment Commission Reports* influenced his writing of both *A Christmas Carol* and *Bleak House*. Examples can be seen in both books that directly reflect content found in the *Commission Reports*. Governmental, matter-of-fact transcriptions regarding illiterate children working at early ages transforms to more accessible fiction, through Dickens use of comedy and dramatic forms. The *CECR: Mines* shows that the perspectives of the children are necessary to get to the truth of the situation. When discussing that children go to work in the mines at the early ages of 5, and that, "this fact could never have been brought to light by the examination of the coal owners only," the deception of the mine owners is clear (13). The children's perspective informs this discussion of social welfare because they are honest and the harsh reality of the situation comes to light. "William Tidswell, six years old, says: 'Does not know what made him come into a pit; came in at five years old'" (13). Dickens uses these same children's perspectives in his novels to bring the educated reader closer to an honest understanding of these destitute children's lives. Bringing the readers closer to the truth might cause them to act on the feelings aroused by their reading.

The *Commission Reports* are important to consider because the reader can experience the same texts that motivated Dickens to become a social reformer novelist. Dickens observed the horrific working conditions of the children in the tin mines of Cornwall firsthand. This may have convinced him to transform the emotionless, factual accounting of the children's lives found in the *CECR* into formats that might more easily speak to the hearts and minds of humanity.

### **Evidence found in *A Christmas Carol* that echoes the *CECR***

The Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to the country and “they stood upon a bleak and desert moor,” “A place where Miners live, who labour in the bowels of the earth,” “with their children and their children’s children, and another generation beyond that” (*Carol* 55). This section shows the poverty of the miner families and why it was most likely necessary for the children to go to work at such early ages. Having read the *CECR*, we can see that Dickens has made a sweet family Christmas scene that tugs at our hearts, and Scrooge’s, even more than the reports, because this family is happy. They are happy despite their living and working conditions and show the contrast between Scrooge’s negative, selfish attitude towards life.

A point of connection between the *CECR* and *A Christmas Carol* is found at Fezziwig’s party, “In came the boy from over the way, who was suspected of not having board enough from his master; trying to hide himself behind the girl from next door but one, who was proved to have had her ears pulled by her mistress” (*Carol* 35). This is certainly very similar to, “His master does not not beat him, but the son does; beats him sometimes with the haft of the hammer on the head, often makes bumps; the master never prevents him” (*CRII* q36). Again Dickens draws inspiration from the reports, but downplays the more violent aspects to reach his maximum audience, which includes children.

The children under the Ghost’s robe, Ignorance and Want, are very similar to the *CECR* children. “From the foldings of its robe, it brought two children; wretched, abject,

frightful, hideous, miserable” (*Carol* 61). Even Scrooge’s cold heart is touched by their miserableness as “he tried to say they were fine children, but the words choked themselves, rather than be parties to a lie of such enormous magnitude” (*Carol* 62). This is perhaps the most moving moment of the novel and is a direct reflection of the *CECR* content. We have the example in the *CECR* of Mary Field, “her experience and her ignorance were just of the same kind (as her sister Eliza); she looked unhealthy, was very badly grown, and still more filthily dirty.” (*CRII* q13). Here you can clearly see the influence the *CECR* had on Dickens and his writing of *A Christmas Carol*, because of the striking similarities in descriptions of the children.

### **Evidence found in *Bleak House* that shows the influence of the *CECR***

Dickens uses children who are illiterate, like Jo in *Bleak House*, to show the reader the importance of children being able to read and write. They must be literate in order to fully participate in their world, and have the best advantage to better their lives, and their society, if they become adults. The *CECR* also shows the importance placed on being able to read, as that was a question asked of the children during their interviews. Mary Field says she “Cannot read; cannot spell her own name; does not know her letters....Never heard of another world, nor of heaven, nor of another life” (*CRII* q13). Jo’s “don’t know nothink” (*BHouse* 197) is an echo of the *CECRII* where little Eliza Field “knows no more.”

The third person narrator of *Bleak House*, and maybe even Dickens himself,

steps into the voice of Jo to emphatically declare the importance of literacy. He shows the inequalities it can cause between those who can read and those who cannot-and who maybe never will be able to. "To see the horses, dogs, and cattle, go by me, and to know that in ignorance I belong to them, and not to the superior beings in my shape, whose delicacy I offend!" (BHouse 198). Jo describes himself as an ignorant animal and this shows us the dire consequences for a generation of children who have no chance for advancement to better lives. Dickens speaks directly to the system with this quote from *Bleak House* using "Tom" as a stand-in for the street children who live in Tom-all-Alone's,

Much mighty speech-making there has been, both in and out of Parliament, concerning Tom, and much wrathful disputation how Tom shall be got right. Whether he shall be put into the main road by constables, or by beadles, or by bell-ringing... there is but one thing perfectly clear, to wit, that Tom only may and can, or shall and will, be reclaimed according to somebody's theory but nobody's practice (551).

This quote suggests that the people in power are all talk and no action. Many people are aware of the issues and aren't working on solutions.

There is hope in the *CECR* and *Bleak House* for illiterate children. Jo can't read or write, but Charley is learning from Esther. "It was very odd, to see what letters Charley's young hand made; they, so wrinkled, and shrivelled, and tottering; it, so plump and round" (378). Charley is also a working child of lower class, but because of Esther's tutelage she will have an advantage for success by being able to communicate with her society and have her voice heard. William Ashton, "can read any book; can

read hand-writing; can write” and shows like Charley that things are changing for some children (*CRII* q11). *Bleak House* and *A Christmas Carol* make the harsh realities portrayed in the *CECR* so much more accessible to the literate public. Many people who could read probably would not have been reading the *CECR*, but would likely have read at least one of Dickens’ books and maybe they loved Jo or got to know Tiny Tim. In that way, Dickens had a great influence in changing the perceptions of the people of not only his time, but future generations as well.

It is interesting that the more negative testimonies from the *CECRII* do not include the names of the children or their employers. No. 154, “his master sometimes beats him with his hand, or a cane or the hammer-handle” “His master’s name is \_\_\_\_\_” (q35). These omissions suggests a lack of acknowledgement of the abuse suffered by the children and exempts the employers from punishment for the abuse. Dickens chose not to use examples of the more horrific conditions found in the reports, but tempered them for a wider audience. Dickens gives the nameless children a voice, name, and character. As is the case with Jo, the character creates a genuine connection with the reader. That connection causes the reader to feel more compassion than they might have if reading about a nameless child in a Commission Report.

### **A Christmas Carol and how it enhances *Bleak House***

In his Christmas book, Dickens uses personal representations of different classes that have happy endings. This book is about being more childlike, and trying as adults to put yourself in the shoes of a poor, illiterate, working children. Child Scrooge

and Jo are revealing to contrast with each other. Their comparison reveals the differences between privilege and want, and ignorance and knowledge. The points of connection between his two novels show Dickens' evolution as a writer, and his transformation of novel forms from humor to drama. He brings attention to individual stories used as examples of needed reform, and to the system of society that contributes to the suffering of children.

The descriptions of Scrooge as child show Dickens intentional use of a character whose situation is very opposite to Jo's. Scrooge illustrates how we should be thankful for what we have, because many children never have equal opportunities- like going to school. Scrooge exemplifies privilege in part because he goes to school, but he is "a lonely boy ... reading near a feeble fire," "alone again, when all the other boys had gone home for the jolly holidays" (*Carol* 31,32). Scrooge fails to be a charitable person even though he is privileged. Jo is born poor and disadvantaged, therefore he never really has a chance to be anything, but he is still a good person.

Ebenezer Scrooge takes so much in his life for granted, but we still feel for him. More importantly, we can identify with him. We know that we don't want to be like him, and we pay close attention to the lesson he is learning. Because he never really knew "want" in the same way as Jo, he is ignorant of the reality of all he has to be thankful for. His acknowledgement of the miner children's Christmas joy as they are "all decked out gaily in their holiday attire," in spite of their sad conditions, begins to transform him into a different person who will no longer take all his blessings for granted (*Carol* 55).

Scrooge begins to understand that he has a responsibility to care about his fellow human beings. In this way, Dickens accomplishes the goal of delivering his message of personal reform, reform that starts with just one person being willing to acknowledge the needs of others.

Dickens child character, “Jo the outlaw with the broom, who had that distant ray of light upon him.” (197) sounds very similar to the childlike descriptions of the Ghost of Christmas Past.

It was a strange figure-like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man

‘What!’ exclaimed the Ghost ‘would you so soon put out, with worldly hands, the light I give?’ (*Carol* 28,29)

Jo and the Ghost both have a light about them. The light of childhood innocence that shines forth from every child’s soul, no matter how dirty, poor, or ignorant they may be.

Jo, who lives where, “ruined shelters have bred a crowd of foul existence,” is “the figure of youth, whose face is hollow, and whose eyes have an emaciated glare” (197,555).

The connection between Jo and Ignorance and Want reveals information because we are urged to “Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy (Ignorance), for on his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased” (*Carol* 62). Jo never gets a chance to grow up due to ignorance and want.

### **Happy endings versus Bleak endings**

Dickens creates endings that achieve maximum effectiveness for their formats. He allows all the characters in *A Christmas Carol* to have joyful, happy endings, while

*Bleak House* is filled with much heartache and sad endings. “Much they saw, and far they went, and many homes they visited, but always with a happy end” (*Carol* 60). Jo’s death is Dickens most effective attempt to cause systemic reform for children’s welfare.

Dead, your Majesty. Dead, my lords and gentlemen. Dead, Right Reverends and Wrong Reverends of every order. Dead, men and women, born with Heavenly compassion in your hearts. And dying thus around us every day. (572)

Dickens zooms out to address the entire system, and the lack of action. He addresses everyone from “your Majesty” the Queen of England, down to every man and woman who can read his words.

The two novels are equally effective in their delivery of the message Dickens intended. In the case of *A Christmas Carol*, the happy endings are necessary to achieve the most effective reception of the message. This book can be read to children by their parents and by children themselves. Children may learn from the cautionary tale to be more loving to their fellow humans, especially those in need. *Bleak House* accomplishes the goal not through happy endings- although there are some, but through death; Jo’s death. His death becomes necessary for the novel to reach its full potential for reform. His death stands as a searing example of what could have been made of Jo’s life, if only someone would reach out to a child in need.

Charles Dickens used his writing to inspire people to look about them, and see the horrors occurring that affected children. He was also an activist for change in the real world who did not stop in his efforts to bring about reform in the areas that most

affected the poor, young, and helpless. Through his speaking, fiction, and non-fiction writing Dickens connected with the widest possible audience to deliver his messages of despair, hope, love, and change.

Through a study of the secondary sources using close examinations of where the texts converge and disconnect, the reader can see that they enhance each other. The two Dickens texts show consistent thought, purpose, and ability to reflect social and moral issues. These texts urge us - the readers, to be inspired to make a better world that starts with one child who can say, "He was wery good to me, he wos" (556).

## Works Cited

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