

**Candles of Dickens in the Darkness of Victorian Era: Common Symbols in Christmas Books**

Karanlık Viktorya Döneminde Dickens'ın Mumları: Christmas Books  
eserindeki Ortak Semboller

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to structurally analyze the common symbols in Charles Dickens's *Christmas Books*, which revived the Christmas spirit in the dark Victorian era. Experiencing the vast impacts of Industrial Revolution, people in Dickens's time were suffering from the consequences of industrialism, poverty, class distinctions and shifting values within a dark world. Upon combining sentimentality towards human nature, Dickens, in his Christmas stories, revived a festival which faded away from English life during the 19th c. Through this blending of a Christmas spirit in the dark Victorian era, Dickens drew the desired picture of a better future for his readers. His 'Dickensian' style enables questioning and judging the discrepancies in the society and the defects of humanity while entertaining the reader with the concerns of family harmony, forgiveness, charity, happiness, compassion and Christmas joy. Yet instead of presenting his messages explicitly, in the deeper structure, Charles Dickens directs his readers through the messages with the use of symbols in his five Christmas stories. To this end, this study aims at clarifying the common symbols in the stories of *Christmas Books* to suggest that Dickens lights a candle via his stories for his readers who were imprisoned in the dark Victorian age.

**Keywords:** Victorian Era, Christmas Spirit, discrepancies, symbols, imprisoned

## Öz

Bu çalışmanın amacı, karanlık Viktorya döneminde Noel ruhunu yeniden canlandıran Charles Dickens'ın *Christmas Books* eserindeki ortak sembollerini yapısal olarak incelemektir. Dickens dönemi insanları, karanlık bir dünyada, Endüstri Devriminin derin etkilerini yaşarken, endüstrileşme, yoksulluk, sınıf ayrımı ve değişen değerlerin sonuçlarından müzdariptiler. Duyarlılığı insan doğası ile birleştiren Dickens, Noel hikâyelerinde, İngiliz yaşamında unutulup giden bir kutlamayı yeniden canlandırmıştır. Karanlık Viktorya dönemi ile harmanlanan bu Noel ruhu ile Dickens, okuyucularına arzulanan daha iyi bir gelecek resmetmiştir. Dickens'ın üslubu, aile uyumu, bağışlama, yardımseverlik, mutluluk, merhamet ve Noel neşesi konuları ile okuyucusunu eğlendirirken, toplumdaki uyuşmazlıkları ve insanlığın hatalarını sorgulama

ve yargılamayı sağlar. Ancak, derin yapıda, mesajlarını açık bir şekilde vermek yerine, Charles Dickens, beş Noel hikâyesindeki sembol kullanımı ile okuyucularını vermek istediği mesaja yönlendirir. Bu amaç doğrultusunda, bu çalışma Dickens'ın, *Christmas Books* eserindeki hikâyeleri aracılığıyla, karanlık Viktorya döneminde hapsolmuş okuyucuları için bir mum yaktığını gösteren ortak sembolleri açıklamayı amaçlar.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Viktorya Dönemi, Noel Ruhü, uyuşmazlıklar, semboller, hapsolmuş

### Introduction

For Charles Dickens, in a world full of sufferings, inequality, poverty, materialism and deficiencies, Christmas was a means of “cultivating the imaginative sensibility of childhood could one keep a true sense of values” (1995: viii). Influenced by the dark visions of Industrial Revolution, the British were struggling in an increasingly mercantile cruel world. As a social critic, Charles Dickens was good at “always putting his finger on the social evil which hurt the sufferer more” (Churchill, 1982: 124). It was then Dickens believed that Christmas could heal the social ills of his society. With his *Christmas Books*, Dickens aimed at presenting his messages to his readers: if upper-classes realize the devastating conditions of the lower classes, there is hope for the salvation of the poor; human warmth can heal the ills of society and charity brings satisfaction. For him, the most proper time to correct the vices of society was Christmas and his stories, based on the spirit of this festival, revived the importance of unity and harmony in the dark Victorian era: “it was a special time for him [Dickens], not as a religious festival but as time in which selfishness was transformed into charity, friends and families were reunited” (Hibbert, 1967: 256). Furthermore, themes of charity, family, goodwill, compassion, peace and happiness in the stories “captured the hearts and minds of the nation” (Lalumia, 2001: 26). Although each of the stories in *Christmas Books* presents varying characters and settings, they preserve the same messages depicted via symbols.

### Common Symbols in Christmas Stories

In all his five stories in *Christmas Books*, Dickens applied ‘ghosts’, ‘phantoms’ and ‘spirits’ to create a magic realism as a tool of recognition, resolution

and reconciliation for the characters in the end. These supernatural means can be considered as the symbol of invisible selves of protagonists. They, in fact, bring the unconscious into a visible form and lead to a kind of recognition of the faults of humanity. Supernatural agents, ghosts, and spirits not only signify the secrets from the past that blight the present in Dickens's Christmas stories, but they also create a more adventurous and attractive atmosphere for the reader. The ghosts of *A Christmas Carol* have significant and different place: to signify the importance of human life and the spirit of Christmas. In *A Christmas Carol*, Scrooge's transformation occurs with the help of the three machinery spirits. Before the visit of the spirits, Scrooge meets with his dead partner's spirit: Marley. Marley's ghost, a hallucination of Scrooge, warns Scrooge about the further visits of spirits and evokes Scrooge's fear about the consequences of his way of life.

As such from the outset of spirits, Scrooge comes to a recognition and changes mentally and spiritually. In the visit of the first spirit, Scrooge cries as he watches his own childhood at school (p. 27); acts like a man out of his wits and enjoys everything undergoing the "strangest agitation" (34); regrets about his cruel attitude towards his clerk (35); recognizes his mistakes about his greed and his ex-girlfriend (35); softens while listening to music at Fred's party where like a child, he begs the Spirit to stay until the guests leave (56) and transforms into a better person who makes charity for the needy (75). With the visit of the third spirit, Scrooge is at the sight of his own grave in terror. He vows to change his life due to the lessons given by the Spirits. His redemption occurs because he promises to live "in the past, the Present, and the Future" (72). Scrooge observes his room throughout the end of the story and is surprised about the changes he has experienced: "It gave him little surprise, however; for he had been revolving in his mind a change of life and thought and hoped he saw his newborn resolutions carried out in this" (63).

In *The Chimes*, Toby 'Trotty' Veck, a poor ticket porter has lost his faith in human condition, hope for the future and compassion for the others. The second story of *Christmas Books* can be approached as a reflection of the first story, *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens provides a similar approach by using supernatural powers for the sake of the protagonist's epiphany. Like Scrooge, Trotty has lost the spirit of love and human value. For him, people "are born

bad" (90), and therefore, on New Year's Eve, "dwarf phantoms, spirits, elfin creatures of the Bells" (121) visit him to remind the importance of improvement, hope and love. They are presented in the story to show Trooty a glimpse of the future. Through spirits, Dickens was making the point that there is always a hope for a better future. In a sense, he lights a candle for his readers to indicate that trust, love and hope might bring advance and peace in a society. As Trooty watches his daughter, Meg's suicide, he begs the Spirits to save her: "I have learnt it! ... I know that we must trust and hope and neither doubt ourselves, nor doubt the Good in one another. I have learnt it from the creature dearest to my heart." (150).

'Fairies and potent spirits' in *The Cricket on the Hearth* lead the old husband to realize the loyalty of his wife. Although there is no ghost, as is seen in *A Christmas Carol*, in this story, there is a cricket foregrounded in the story to bless the Peerybingle family. Like a guardian angel, it brings awareness and happiness to the protagonist. The 'Presence' presents shadows that fall upon the mirror or the picture and Caleb observes what had happened. When the great shadow of the 'Stranger' shows Caleb his wife, the nimble Fairies work like bees to clear off the misunderstandings about Dot. The fairies show Dot as bright, loyal and beautiful:

Although the shadow of the Stranger fell at intervals upon the glass – always distinct, and big, and thoroughly defined – it never fell so darkly as at first. Whenever it appeared, the Fairies uttered a general cry of consternation, and plied their little arms and legs, with inconceivable activity, to rub it out. And whenever they got at Dot again, and showed her to him once more, bright and beautiful, they cheered in the most inspiring manner. (208).

In this respect, Dickens overtly criticizes the upper-classes by indicating that like Caleb, they are "blind to what is going on around them" (Gitter, 1999: 680). During the epiphany scene of Caleb, Dickens lights another candle for his readers to present his message: rich would eventually and hopefully gain empathy for the suffering poor for a prosperous future.

Like the spirits in *A Christmas Carol*, in *The Haunted Man*, Redlaw is visited by a spirit that gives him the gift of forgetfulness of memories. Unlike other Christmas stories, the terms 'phantom' (36 times); 'shadow' (14 times) and

'shade' (5 times) are used more than 'ghost' (8 times) to describe the Spirit, which is ghastly and cold, colorless in its leaden face and hands. The spirit is called as 'Something' which is the dread companion of the haunted man (316). The phantom in *The Haunted Man* is a supernatural agent and an allegorical figure helping to affect the protagonist's redemption. Dickens introduces this fluid ghost image for an important purpose: it represents Redlaw's alter-ego. A disappointed man, Redlaw has become "a man without a soul, as incapable of compassion, artistic sensitivity or spiritual understanding as the abandoned waif whose neglected short life is equally barren of memories" (Glancy, 1980: 57) after he makes a bargain with the ghost. Redlaw prefers not to look at the shadows on his walls that remind him of his past; however, as he realizes his mistake, he pays attention to what they express. In the story, the spirits, ghosts and phantoms follow him to show the importance of human memory. Redlaw realizes that he has made a mistake by accepting the gift of the spirit and he begs: "Give me back myself" (347). The story ends as Redlaw takes part in the Swidger family's Christmas celebrations around the table. Redlaw sees the shadows clearly as

...the shadows once more stole out of their hiding-places, and danced about the room, showing the children marvelous shapes and faces on the walls, and gradually changing what was real and familiar there, to what was wild and magical. (383).

The spirit in the story not only helps Redlaw refresh his past but also develops a sense of revival of Christmas spirit based on charity, forgiveness and compassion for the others. Applying the spirit in the center of the story, Dickens presented the significance of past and memories through

the theme itself revolv[ing] around Dickens' belief that memory is a softening and chastening power, that the recollection of old sufferings and old wrongs can be used to touch the heart elicit sympathy with the sufferings of others ... For it was his suffering and the memory of his sufferings which had given him the powerful sympathy of the great writer, just as his recollection of those harder days inspired him with that pity for the poor and the dispossessed which was a mark of his social writings. (Ackroyd 1990: 553).

The stories in *Christmas Books* remain magical and adventurous, yet, as the plots are logically conceived, the juxtaposition of the real and the magical seems unproblematic when Dickens's aim is considered: Victorian people need to remember the past and the power of Christmas spirit to annihilate the inequalities and defects. By this treatment, Dickens repeated the symbols in each of his Christmas story to highlight the importance of charity, compassion and quality among classes in a society.

Another constructive symbol in *Christmas Stories* is 'fire': 'heart and core' (304) of home. Dickens adopts the symbol of fire to underscore the significance of family union, warmth among people and gathering with a harmony in society. In *The Battle of Life*, for instance, fire is personified as follows:

The bright fire crackled and sparkled, rose and fell, as though it joined the dance itself, in right good fellowship. Sometimes it roared as if it were the eye of the old room: it winked too, sometimes, like a knowing patriarch, upon the youthful whisperers in corners. Sometimes it sported with the holly-boughs; and shining on the leaves by fits and starts, made them look as if they were in the cold winter night again, and fluttering in the wind... (272).

As is implied in the quotation above, 'fire' becomes a member of the family and is personified like a character: reacting, responding and acting in a challenging life of two sisters, Marion and Grace, who make a "bright and sacred" (259) fireside. In *The Battle of Life*, in a wintry Christmas season, the chimney corner makes a home doubly home: "To give the chimney corner new delights. To shed a ruddier glow upon the faces gathered round the hearth; and draw each fireside group into a closer and more social league, against the roaring elements without" (269). Fire symbolizes cheer and joy as the doctor cries while waiting for Alfred and a big celebration: "Pile up the fire here, Britain! Let it shine upon the holly till it winks again" (270). As characters light the fire, Dickens lights a candle for his audience: compassion, love and support might bring unity and peace in the society.

Symbol 'fire' is repeated many times (40 times) to underscore the need of warmth and family union in the heart of the miser, Scrooge in *A Christmas Carol*. As the Ghost of Christmas Past shows Scrooge his own childhood, the child Scrooge appears as a lonely boy "reading near a feeble fire" (28). Fire

gets stronger with joyful memories in the story as Scrooge's room undergoes a surprising transformation with the fire when "such a mighty blaze (goes) roaring up the chimney, as that dull petrification of a hearth (has) never known in Scrooge's time" (41). At this stage, with the journey of the Ghost of Christmas Present, Scrooge realizes "the brightness of the roaring fires in kitchens, parlours, and all sorts of rooms" (51). As the scene changes into Fezziwig's house, "the lamps were trimmed, fuel was heaped upon the fire; and the warehouse was as snug, and warm, and dry..." (32).

'Fire' also symbolizes gathering of families with a warm atmosphere in the cold winter days of a new year. When the Ghost of Christmas Present takes Scrooge to Fred's house, during their journey, Scrooge watches a cheerful company "assembled round a glowing fire...singing a Christmas song" (52). In the cold and poor house of the Cratchits, fire has a significant place because it symbolizes unity and warmth of the whole family. Mrs. Cratchit gathers her children around the fire: "Sit ye down by the fire, my dear and have a warm, Lord bless ye" (47). After the dinner, "the hearth is swept; the fire is made up; a shovel of chestnut is put on the fire and the whole family drowns round the hearth" (49).

When Trotty feels secure and happier in *The Chimes*, he mends the fire and draws his chair to the warm hearth (117). 'Fire' (repeated 26 times) symbolizes the importance of gathering of people and brightness in the cold winter days: "They [the Bells] hung there, in all weathers, with the wind and rain driving in upon them; facing only the outsides of all those houses; never getting any nearer to the blazing fires that gleam and shone upon the windows" (87). By the end of the tale, Trotty watches his daughter, Meg sitting by the fire "as if it were an Angel in his house" (150).

Accordingly, 'fire', inferring home and warmth, changes due to the changes of mood in the characters. The fire of the hearth in *The Cricket on the Hearth* becomes cold and dark as Carrier doubts about his wife (203) and "the jolly blaze uprose and fell, flashing and gleaming on the little Haymaker at the top of the Dutch clock, ... and nothing was in motion but the flame" (158) in the Peerybingle home.

In the next Christmas story, *The Haunted Man*, ‘fire’ is an important symbol and it is “scarcely warm” (339) during the conversation between the chemist and his student in a small room. Redlaw’s Christmas dinner is held “in the old Hall, by no other light than that of a great fire” (383). By emphasizing ‘fire’ in the story, Dickens aimed at depicting his message explicitly: fire creates a sense of warmth and unity among people who “might join hands and make a ring around England” (382).

Another important common symbol in all the stories of *Christmas Books* is ‘child(ren)’. Having led a sorrowful and desperate childhood, Charles Dickens reflected his archaic memories through the depiction of children as ill, suffering, disabled, crippled, awkward or poor. Having left his education, due to the debts of his father in prison, Dickens had to work in the blacking factory and “for a talented and ambitious child there is no hell worse than this, all the dirt, all the dreariness, all the poverty” (Ackroyd, 2002: 40). Dickens rendered the poor conditions of children in his stories to depict the healing power of compassion, equality, love and charity. As Dickens’s audience was mainly lower-middle class, his emphasis on poverty, injustice and hypocrisy of the upper-middle class made his works popular. Although Dickens was criticized by his portrayal of children in mistreated ways, he wanted people to be aware of the situation that “almost half of the funerals in London were conducted for children under the age of ten, carried off by sickness or malnutrition” (Ackroyd, 2002: 183).

To further clarify, the imagery of children in his Christmas stories symbolizes the ‘rebirth’ for Victorian people. Charles Dickens was interested in the deaf, crippled, blind, orphaned, maltreated and disabled children to create pathos and provide emotionalism (Collins, 1964: 73). Children in the stories symbolize lack of education, parental guidance and a warm family. In Dickens’s time children were the most affected group of the society: many suffered in poor conditions or worked in workhouses; orphans or neglected children lived in nursing houses or on streets and many died from illnesses or malnutrition. Astonishingly, the situation and appearance of children in Christmas stories improve after the epiphany of the protagonists to underscore the need of ‘hope’.

In *A Christmas Carol*, the condition of the crippled Tiny Tim touches the hearts of both Scrooge and the readers. By saving Tiny Tim, Scrooge saves both his soul and gains the feeling of satisfaction. As the story ends in happiness, Tiny Tim overcomes his illness, the two deformed children disappear, and healthy happy children sing carols on the streets. The reformation of Scrooge symbolizes rebirth of a society, which indicates that compassion, charity and empathy can heal all the deficiencies in a society. Besides, with the depiction of a suffering child, Dickens not only created pathos for his readers about the inequalities in the society, but also demonstrated the consequences unless the upper classes consider the problems of the poor. As Scrooge saves the child, Dickens lights a candle in the Victorian darkness: mankind can change.

Moreover, Ignorance and Want, savage slum children, appear in the first visit of the spirit and they are described as ugly, monster-like deformed allegorical figures. These two devilish children are "wretched, abject, frightful, hideous, miserable" (58). For Collins (1964), the vision of these two children could possibly be a memory of the pupils at the Ragged School Dickens had seen (73). When Scrooge pities them, the ghost recalls his words about the poor children: "Are there no workhouses?" (59). These children represent the suffering conditions of the children, who work in factories or workhouses at Dickens's time.

Like in *A Christmas Carol*, in *The Chimes*, the imagery of Meg's child symbolizes the need for a 'rebirth' in society. Trotty helps Will Fern and the child. The baby is a weak, worn out orphan taken from the Union. The spirit of a child, in the shape of Will Fern's orphan niece, shows Trotty a dead body and the sorrow of Meg in the overflow of action. Yet, during the action, the child grows up but in a miserable and indecent life. As the action proceeds Meg saves the child and the Spirit of the child returns innocent and radiant through the recognition of Trotty.

Another child figure is Meg's child, signifying a rebirth for Meg and Trotty. When Trotty sees Meg with her child, he is happy that "She loves her child" (144) and becomes happier when the spirits save her with the child in the end. Dickens saves the child in the epiphany scene of Trotty to depict his

message: everyone has the potential to change the current conditions for a prosperous future.

In *The Cricket on the Hearth*, the surprising appearance of a gigantic 'Baby' appears in Mrs. Peerybingle's arms and it is "much taller and much older than herself; who had to stoop a long way down, to kiss her... Six foot six, with the lumbago, might have done it" (161). Surprisingly, the deficiencies of the baby are seen usual by the parents while the reader discerns the problem:

Not that there was much of the Baby: speaking of it as a thing of weight and measure: but there was a vast deal to do about and about it, and it all had to be done by easy stages. For instance: when the Baby was got, by hook and by crook, to a certain point of dressing, and you might have rationally supposed that another touch or two would finish him off and turn him out a tip-top Baby challenging the world... (187).

As is depicted above, the Baby with its ambiguous outward appearance symbolizes the deficiencies in the society in Victorian era. Yet, throughout the story, the Baby appears with the mother as "The Fairies were prodigiously excited when they showed her (Dot), with the Baby" (208). In the end, the Baby symbolizes a kind of overt restart and a celebration for a prosperous future of the nation. The problems are solved, and the happiness comes both for Caleb and the family:

You may be sure the Carrier was in a state of perfect rapture; and you may be sure Dot was likewise; and you may be sure they all were, inclusive of Miss Slowboy, who cried copiously for joy, and, wishing to include her young charge in the general interchange of congratulations, handed round the Baby to everybody in succession, as if it were something to drink. (223).

The unnamed child in *The Haunted Man*, unlike the baby in *The Cricket on the Hearth*, is a monstrous figure. It first appears suddenly like a creature or a monster. The allegorical savage child evokes 'Ignorance' in *A Christmas Carol*. It has the size of an infant but his ugly and dirty face reminds the reader of a greedy old man. It has bright eyes and naked feet. Dickens portrays it as "a baby savage, a young monster, a child who had never been a child, a creature who might live to take the outward form of man, but who, within, would live

and perish a mere beast” (p. 322). When Redlaw finds the child, he tries to help the suffering boy who confronts him in violence. However, the child reappears when Redlaw realizes his loneliness and his mistake. After the epiphany scene of Redlaw, the child’s face is cleaned, and his wounds are bandaged by Milly. Redlaw shows compassion rather than ignorance to the boy and touches his hair eventually. By depicting the changes of the child, Dickens tried to indicate that compassion and charity can save the whole nation.

### **Conclusion**

In the light of these ideas presented above, by presenting the common symbols of supernatural powers, fire and child (ren), Dickens embraces his readers with his sentimentality and awareness about the situation of his society. Aware of the social, cultural and economic constructions of the Victorian era, Dickens attempted to encounter the defects of his society with a critical eye. As a writer and a critic, Charles Dickens appealed to the need of charity, compassion, importance of family union, empathy and sentimentality. He wanted upper and upper-middle class to realize the suffering conditions of the poor working-class and heal the conditions for a better future. The last scenes of the stories present characters celebrating a festival, which indicates Dickens’s message as a Victorian writer. Since people yearned for hope, happiness and peace in the society, Dickens highlighted the significance of unity, compassion, empathy and harmony in his Christmas stories. Seen in this light, he lights a candle in each of his story in *Christmas Books* to make his readers realize the poor conditions of the lower classes and “join hands and make a ring round England” (p. 382) in the darkness of Victorian era.

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