

Dickens's Christmas Tree: the Gothic Side of Familiar Things

by Clotilde de Stasio

It is generally recognized by literary critics and sociologists that Dickens helped reinvent the tradition of Christmas in Nineteenth-Century Britain. The contributors to a volume entitled *Unwrapping Christmas* (1993) maintain that Christmas celebrations were dying out before the publication of *A Christmas Carol*, “the most prominent and most often repeated Christmas tale”¹. In actual fact, Dickens’s attempt at reviving the Christmas festivity had started even earlier with one of the *Sketches by Boz* – “A Christmas Dinner” – and with the famous Dingle Dell episode in *The Pickwick Papers*. In “A Christmas Dinner” the celebration takes place in the town and details about food and gifts abound in the description. In the XXVIII chapter of the P.P the countryside tradition of songs, dances, games, the kiss under the mistletoe, the game of blind-man’s bluff, the general festive and charitable mood are revived and enthusiastically described to the reader. In both narratives the focus is on the family and the hearth, but in the London sketch there is a greater emphasis on children having fun. The narrator underlines the fact that the Christmas

party should be totally devoid of cares and worries and marked by youthful merriment. There is even an insistence on voluntary forgetfulness as a means of consolation, though the list of the things one should forget reveals the usual Dickensian obsession with death and mourning. Dickens seems also to be building a whole vocabulary underlining his view of Christmas as a time for happiness and forgiveness. Words like “pleasant”, “happy”, “merriment”, “delight” recur in both writings. The customary character of the event is also stressed.

This complex symbolic ritual was obviously meant to underpin Dickens’s humane view of social relationships as opposed to the dominant utilitarian ethos. As such it went through a process of revision and enrichment in the series of Christmas stories published in the so-called “hungry forties”. *A Christmas Carol* was the one that most reinforced this idealized picture of the Christmas festival, adding new elements, such as a concern for the poor, a miraculous conversion from selfishness to altruism, from avarice to lavishness, and a touch of the supernatural. Thanks to the enormous popularity and power of the images devised by Dickens Christmas celebrations were fully revived both in Britain and in the U.S. However, along with this myth of happiness and goodwill, one cannot help noticing contradictions and a dark side. One major contradiction has been pointed out by sociologists: the Christmas festival can appear – as Dickens tried to make it appear – “as an attempt to tame capitalism or ameliorate its negative consequences for society” but it can also appear as “an embodiment of capitalistic val-

¹ Russell W. Belk, “Materialism and the Making of the Modern American Christmas”, in Daniel Miller (ed.) *Unwrapping Christmas*, Oxford, Clarendon Press 1993, p.85.

ues”². There is also a sort of anthropological paradox: this ritual of rebirth takes place in winter, the darkest, coldest and most sterile of the seasons -at least in our hemisphere-. In actual fact Dickens seems to have been aware of this paradox since he inserts into the *Pickwick-Papers* episode a Christmas song where the charms of spring are dismissed as unsuitable to the Christmas atmosphere and Winter is proclaimed “the king of Seasons all”. The narrator also stresses the fact that the blazing fire sends its light into the remotest corners of the room, thus defeating darkness.

But shadows and evil still lurked behind this glorious image of light and goodness, and while creating his powerful and lasting Christmas myth Dickens perceived its contradictory nature. Every so often his doubts about the beneficent influence of Christmas rituals filter through causing a discrepancy between the anxiety-ridden imagery and the more reassuring discourse. This is particularly evident in the fourth part of *A Christmas Carol* and in an article published in *Household Words* in 1850 under the title “A Christmas tree”. As we know, throughout *A Christmas Carol* the prevailing festive mood is marred by disturbing images and situations: Marley’s ghostly appearance, Scrooge’s nastiness and his childhood memories of loneliness and unhappiness, tiny Tim’s illness and his father’s worries. But the most shocking event is, of course, the appearance of the “Last of the Spirits”. The Ghosts of Christmas Past and Christmas Present are, on the whole, rather euphoric figures reminiscent of characters in fairy and oriental tales and classical mythology: the former is compared to the genii in *The Arabian Nights*, the latter looks like a jovial Bacchus. The Ghost of Christmas Future, on the contrary, is a totally negative figure: it is shrouded in

² Daniel Miller, “A Theory of Christmas”, *Unwrapping Christmas*, cit., p.20.

darkness and the frightened Scrooge can only make out “one outstretched hand” pointing to nightmarish sights of death and neglect. This synecdoche is not a mere rhetorical device: the ghost’s hand, like Marley’s head at the beginning of the story, seems to have a life of its own and therefore stirs up horror both in the character and in the reader. We learn from Freud that truncated parts of the human body can have a particularly uncanny effect on the human psyche;³ such effect Gerard de Nerval had already exploited in one of his tales: *La main enchantée*. In *A Christmas Carol*, though the protagonist seems eventually to recover from his terrors, neither the story’s happy end nor the reassuring final message succeed in erasing the horrifying image from the reader’s mind.



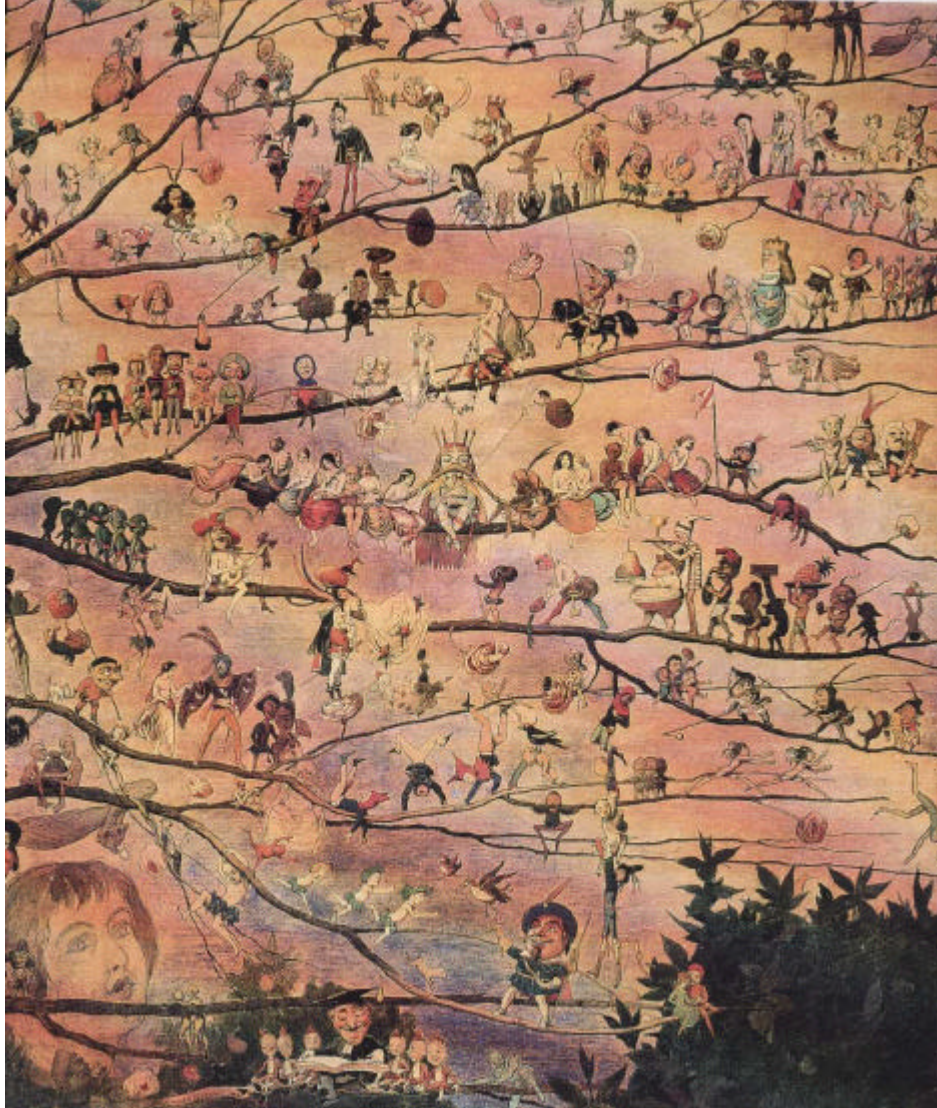
John Leech,
"The Last of
the Spirits"

The Last of the Spirits

³ Rosemary Jackson stresses the importance of Dickens’s “frequent use of synecdoche, presenting characters as fragmented bodies” (*Fantasy, The Literature of Subversion*, London, Methuen 1981, p.133).

In “A Christmas Tree” the oscillation between the festive and the depressing mood is even more marked and disturbing. At first the image of the tree appears as a joyful communal symbol, closely related to the family: children are described around the tree, some of them in the arms of their loving mothers and nannies. At the same time, the words “German toy” seem to signal both the artificiality and the unhomeliness of the tree; besides, the reference to the “motley collection of odd objects” on it already brings into the description an element of disquieting grotesque. Then, as it often happens with Dickens, childhood memories break in and the next image is a nightmarish scene where a terrified lonely boy is staring at a kind of unnatural upside-down shadowy tree “which appears to grow downward towards the earth”. In the child’s troubled perception the objects on the tree acquire an even more threatening nature: first the tumbler “rolling its fat body about” and fixing his “lobster eyes” on the boy, then “the infernal snuff box out of which sprang a demoniacal Councillor” and the cardboard man with a “sinister expression” on his face, lastly the “dreadful mask”, a source of endless terror, possibly because of its link with death. Death masks were a common feature of Victorian reality and, according to Dickens’s biographers, for this reason “he had always hated masks”⁴.

⁴ Peter Ackroyd, *Dickens*, London, Minerva 1991 (1st Ed. 1990), p.xii.



Richard Doyle, "The Fairy Tree"

There are of course other toys on the tree which look delightful, and even marvellous, like the dolls house, wonderful things that already suggest the consumer side of Christmas. The vocabulary of contrasting words like

“wondered” and “frightened”, “bright” and “shadowy”, “fairy” and “ghastly” suggests both the duplicity of the tree and the child’s mixed feelings towards it. One is reminded of the child’s face at the bottom of Richard Doyle’s painting *The Fairy Tree*, marked by wonder and fear at the sight of so many strange creatures perched on the branches. But Dickens’s tree has an even more disquieting character: both the tree and the objects on it are continuously changing, from real to unreal, from distinct to indistinct: “Everything is capable of being changed into Anything”. The uncanny metamorphic quality of the tree, its ghostliness and ghastliness have been cleverly captured by the Italian etcher Mirando Haz in a series of black-and-white illustrations. The tree appears as a bizarre construction decorated with and surrounded by – as a commentator writes in the illustrated volume – “all the paraphernalia of the unconscious”: “Masks with hollow eyes and gaping mouths, huge webby (clawlike) hands reaching out... loose hair melting into the darkness”⁵. In spite of the many candles lighted on its branches Haz’s tree has no brilliancy. The etcher himself explains his choice from the fact that, according to him, Dickens is actually engaged in representing the negative forces inside society, the idea of exclusion which the domestic image of Christmas necessarily implies: “All those who do not belong to the group... are excluded with the kindest, meanest and most lethal no”⁶. And black is the colour of negation. Moreover Haz brings forth the gothic potential of the Christmas tree by emphasizing its elongated, tapering shape, like a spire on a gothic cathedral.

⁵ Valentina Poggi, “Dickens seen by Mirando Haz”, Charles Dickens, *Un albero di Natale*, Milano, Vanni Scheiwiller 1981, p. 144.

⁶ Mirando Haz, “A Note on the Portfolio of Twelve Etchings Dickens-Christmas”, C.Dickens, *Un albero di Natale*, cit., p.155.



Mirando Haz, "The Christmas Tree"

Of course, one might find this visual interpretation of Dickens's piece somewhat exaggerated. In fact the writer tries to keep a more balanced view of the Christmas celebration. Soon after bringing into focus the dark side of the tree he evokes the child's joyful expectation of gifts and the image of the crib as a symbol of re-birth and hope. However, a chain of micro ghost stories again plunges the reader into a disquieting atmosphere. In actual fact, we perceive a "continuous oscillation between reassurance and threat", the "dialectic of comfort and disturbance" which, according to David Punter, runs all through the Gothic.⁷

In this final part of the piece, the split personality – again a typical Gothic feature! – no longer takes place between the adult and the child, but between the narrator and himself as the protagonist of tales of the supernatural. "We are a middle-aged nobleman", he declares while relating the uncanny events in a haunted house and ends his story saying "We are dead now". Here again one should not overlook the fact that in this long narrative of ghostly events Dickens keeps a half serious, half joking attitude and tone, especially where he seems to offer a playful catalogue of ghostly situations. However the typical uncanny event – dead people coming back from the "other world" bringing evil and death – appears to be taken quite seriously by the narrator and the reader feels unsettled. In a way, the whole piece presents the reader with two opposing views of Christmas: the "evangelical" and the "Calvinist(ic)". The former with its exclusion of evil and the devil from the festivity, the latter with its condemnation of Christmas celebrations as a kind of pagan ritual and its belief that the threat to man's salvation can never be totally banished. "Legion is the name of the

⁷ David Punter, *The Literature of Terror*, London, Longman 1980, p.423.

German castles, where we sit up alone to wait for the spectre.” This sentence, placed toward the end of the piece somehow sums up this uncertainty: will the demons be chased away by Christ as in the Gospel episode? or will they for ever threaten man’s happiness and stability? I am not sure that this marks the start of a gloomier view of Christmas and of life in general in Dickens’ fiction. In actual fact if one takes into consideration the Christmas episode in *Great Expectations* one can see it as the complete reversal of the one in the *Pickwick Papers*. Christmas does not mark any change in the dreary life Pip leads with his sister; it is even a source of new anxieties for the poor child. Apart from the gothic scene of the encounter with Magwitch in the marsh, the scene at home appears as a grotesque representation of the Christmas festivity. There is no joy in the bustling activity. It looks rather like a different kind of drudgery, or, at least, such it is considered by the stern housewife. The same effect of uncanny parody had appeared in an article published in *Household Words* describing the Christmas celebrations in a lunatic asylum. There the tree dominated in all its glory, “growing out of the floor, a blaze of light and glitter”, but around it, besides the present mad men and women in a state of lethargic apathy, were the phantoms of all the mad people who had been “physicked, whirligigged, chained, handcuffed, beaten, cramped, and tortured” in previous times and of their torturers, the mad doctors, a breed of demons never to be completely exorcized⁸.

It should be sufficiently evident that in *A Christmas Tree* – a journalistic piece endowed with a strong metafictional character – the discourse on

⁸ “A Curious Dance Round a Curious Tree”, Dickens, Charles, *Selected Journalism 1850-1870*, David Pascoe ed., Harmondsworth, Penguin 1997.

Christmas is strictly connected with a literary discourse regarding the interplay between fantasy and realism in fiction. And also between fantasy and visuality. Dickens presumably believed in the link between visuality and fantasy and also in their connection with fear as an essential part of storytelling. Among the “motley collection of odd objects” on the Christmas tree there are books and there are stories – most of them from the *Arabian Nights*. The narrator points out the fact that these stories are being invented and told under the threat of a death sentence; and shows how both the storyteller and the listener are involved in a repeated shift from fear to relief. This seems to anticipate the theme of one of the pieces in *The Uncommercial Traveller* : the famous “Nurse’s Stories”. Here, Dickens more overtly suggests that his own ability as a storyteller sprung from the childhood terrors inspired by his nurse’s terrifying tales and above all by the dreadful mimicry which supported the narration: “clawing the air with both hands and uttering a long hollow groan”. This seems to imply the idea that a visual shock is fundamental to the reader’s reception as it helps the narrator to achieve an effect of truth that would otherwise be unattainable. The frightened child looking at the stories on the tree or watching “the female bard’s” frightening performance, finds it impossible to say “I do not believe you”. Similarly, at the end of Dickens’ stories, the reader, struck by the grotesque, upsetting imagery is unable to exclaim – as the sceptical king mentioned in *A Christmas Tree* does: “Ghosts, ghosts? No such thing, no such thing!”.