

**A Christmas Carol**  
**Professor Dr. Divya A. Dohss**  
**Department of Humanities and Social Sciences**  
**Indian Institute of Technology, Madras**  
**Lecture 34**  
**Gothic City: the City of Spectres**

(Refer Slide Time: 00:11)



## Week 7: A Christmas Carol

Lecture 7D Gothic City: the City of Spectres

Image source: Illustrator Arthur Rackham  
<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/ghosts-in-a-christmas-carol>



Hello, and welcome to week seven's lectures on A Christmas Carol. In today's lecture, I am going to discuss the Gothic city, and how the city, which is being fueled by the industrial revolution in Great Britain is turning into the city of spectres.

(Refer Slide Time: 0:35)

### Gothic London



- "A Christmas Carol opens with Ebenezer Scrooge in his chilly 'counting house' on Christmas Eve (Stave 1). Outside London, the 'great wen' is shrouded in filthy brown fog. It is the 'hungry forties'. The 1840s saw huge distress among the working classes and mass starvation in Ireland. 'Chartism (a working-class reformist movement) raised the fearful possibility of revolution. It was a nervous time."

- Text source: <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-origins-of-a-christmas-carol>



“A Christmas Carol opens with Ebenezer Scrooge in his chilly counting house on Christmas Eve. Outside London, the ‘great wen’ is shrouded in filthy brown fog. It is the ‘hungry forties’. The 1840s saw huge distress among the working classes and mass starvation in Ireland. Chartism a working-class reformist movement raised the fearful possibility of revolution. It was a nervous time.’”

The details in this set of criticism establish the context for Dickens’ A Christmas Carol which was published in 1843. This novella captures the tone of the hungry 40s in Great Britain. Scrooge, who is comparatively comfortable than the rest of his brethren in London, is still not willing to spend on coal. Therefore, his county house is chilly. The entire London outside his county house is shrouded. The word shroud is very interesting in the Gothic context. There is the suggestion of the funeral embedded in the word shrouded. Entire London is covered in this filthy, dirty, brown, bleak fog, which is preventing visibility.

There were starvation deaths in Ireland at that time and the working classes in Great Britain were anxious and in distress. They were not comfortable. Reformist movements were ongoing. One such was the Chartist movement, and the Chartist movement is suggestive of the possibility of a revolution in Great Britain. Something in the fashion of the French revolution was expected in Great Britain, but it did not happen.

Anyway, nevertheless, it was a nervous time, the hungry 1840s was a nervous time in Great Britain, and Scrooge is used as a symbol to resolve some of the problems in society. The solution for providing economic comfort is invested on the shoulders of the individual and that individual is Ebenezer Scrooge in Dickens’ A Christmas Carol. So the act of charity was invested with a lot of faith in this particular novella.

(Refer Slide Time: 3:49)

## The Gothic Streets



- “Opposite Scrooge’s door a dying woman is sitting in the gutter – ghosts of rich businessmen dancing around her. It is they who have brought her to this sad pass.”



Text Source: (John Sutherland, 2014)

Text and Image source: <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/the-origins-of-a-christmas->

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“Opposite Scrooge’s door, a dying woman is sitting in the gutter, ghosts of rich businessmen dancing around her. It is they who have brought her to this sad pass.” It is an interesting image that begins the novella. Outside of the haunting houses of Ebenezer Scrooge, there is a poor woman sitting outside and around her, there are ghosts of rich businessmen who have brought her to this kind of situation where she is homeless and penniless.

What is implied is this, if the businessman had been charitable, this woman would not be outside in the cold during winter and at the time of Christmas. Immediately the point that I was just mentioning comes to mind again, the idea that we can do a lot of good to the poor people in society is suggested time and again in this novella. And you can once again see that Gothic overtones of this novella with the ghost of businessmen prancing about and dancing around this poor woman.

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## Bob Cratchit



- “At the end of his 12-hour day Scrooge dismisses his clerk, Bob Cratchit. Cratchit – his name evokes a scratching pen – is a ‘scrivener’. Before typewriters and photocopying machines, the necessary copying of business and legal documents was done long hand... Cratchit has one day’s holiday a year, and earns 15 shillings (75p) per six-day week: half a crown a day. On it he supports a large, happy, but chronically hard-up family. The family favourite is Tiny Tim, a little ‘cripple’ boy”

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“At the end of his 12-hour day, Scrooge dismisses his clerk, Bob Cratchit. Cratchit, his name evokes a scratching pen- is a scrivener. Before typewriters and photocopying machines, the unnecessary copying of business and legal documents was done longhand. Cratchit has one day's holiday a year and earns 15 shillings, 75 pence per six-day a week, half a crown a day. On it, he supports a large happy but chronically hard-up family. The family's favourite is Tiny Tim, a little cripple boy.”

The details establish the fact that Ebenezer Scrooge had been paying starvation wages to his clerk, and the name of the clerk is interesting because it symbolically indicates the kind of work that he does, he is scratching on a piece of paper with the pen. In other words, he is copying information before typewriters and photocopiers came into this world.

So that is his job, and Cratchit is chronically hard-up. He is perpetually penniless and hard-up in the sense that there is not sufficient money to run the family comfortably, and therefore, the family is in difficult circumstances. The family's favourite is Tiny Tim, the crippled boy, and despite the financial distress of the family, the members are quite at peace with themselves.

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## First Stirrings



- “The first stirrings of the tale can be found in a visit Dickens made to Manchester a month before he began writing. One of the great orators of his time (only fragments of his eloquence, alas, survive) he spoke at the city’s Athenaeum on 5 October.
- It was a memorable evening for those present, and those who read accounts of the speech in the next day’s papers.”
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Dickens gave a lecture in Manchester the month before he started writing A Christmas Carol. He was a great orator. He had eloquent speaking skills. Much of his speech does not survive intact, but there are only fragments here and there. But those who watched his speech on that day were much impressed by the nature of truth and the rhetoric with which he used to communicate the truth to the audience. And Manchester is an industrial town.

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## First Stirrings



"As Dickens's biographer, Michael Slater, describes:  
'Dickens dwelt on the terrible sights he had seen among the juvenile population in London's jails and doss-houses and stressed the desperate need for educating the poor. This occasion seems to have put into his mind the idea for a [Christmas Eve tale] which should help to open the hearts of the prosperous and powerful towards the poor and powerless but which should also bring centrally into play the theme of memory that, as we have seen, was always so strongly associated with Christmas for him.'"

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In that speech, Dickens records the need to educate the poor, the needy, and he also states that the prosperous, the rich, the wealthy had to open up their hearts towards those who are in need in society. Further, the idea of memory is important to Dickens. The idea of memory does play quite a bit of a role in much of his fiction. And, as always, Christmas is also associated with remembering one's friends and family and the society.

Therefore, this idea of memory is also used very significantly in this Christmas tale because Dickens makes Scrooge remember in a very potent manner about his past and how the past transforms his present. Dickens was much affected by the kind of life that the poor children lived and had in London's jails. The word doss-houses referred to lodging houses in a very poor state with very basic amenities.

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## Gothic City



- "Manchester – the 'workshop of the world' – was famous not merely for its industry but the utilitarian philosophy that drove it. It may not be clear what Scrooge's line of business is. But his beliefs, before his change of heart, are crystal clear – pure Manchester.
- 'Are there no workhouses?' he asks, when the two gentleman ask for a charitable donation. If the poor die (like the poor woman outside his house) it will, he says, solve 'the surplus population' problem (Stave 3; Stave 1). Concern with over-population had been stimulated by the stern philosophy of Thomas Robert Malthus who foresaw catastrophe for England if its masses were not 'checked' by famine, war, or disease."
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“Manchester, the workshop of the world was famous not merely for its industry, but the utilitarian philosophy that drove it. It may not be clear what Scrooge’s line of business is, but his beliefs, before his change of heart, are crystal clear- pure Manchester. ‘Are there no workhouses?’ He asks, when the two gentlemen ask for a charitable donation. ‘If the poor die (like the poor woman outside his house), it will, he says, solve the surplus population problem. The concern with over-population had been stimulated by the stern philosophy of Thomas Robert Malthus who foresaw catastrophe for England if its masses were not checked by famine, war, or disease.”

There are two things. One, the industrial revolution was fueling poverty. It was drastically affecting the fabric of society. The rural population were affected by the rapid pace of industrialization. Second, there was the issue of surplus population, especially the poor, which is represented by, not just Bob Cratchit and his family, but also that woman who was outside of the county house homeless and penniless. So, there was this philosophy of Robert Malthus, who believe that the over-population would become catastrophic unless it was checked, unless the population was reduced by famine, war, or disease, which would wipe out on this kind of population.

So, John Sutherland, very, very powerfully in this set of criticism lays bare some of the trajectories running through London and which was refracted through the work of Charles Dickens in A Christmas Carol. Ebenezer Scrooge represents the hard philosophy, the hard-heartedness of the industrial philosophy, the hard flinty nature of industrialism.

And therefore, some of his questions, such as the one, ‘Are the no workhouses to take care of the poor?’, makes sense within that framework. Workhouses were set up in order to look after the poor, but they were not doing their work and therefore, the poor just spilt out of certain institutions such as the workhouses. So, it is very interesting to look at the character of Ebenezer Scrooge from the point of view of industrialization and understand the Gothic nature which suffuses characters such as Scrooge and the businessman like him.

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## Hungry 1840s



- “The 1840s were not merely ‘hungry’ but hard hearted. It was a philosophy embodied in Ebenezer Scrooge – not merely a solitary miser (like, for example, [George Eliot’s](#) Silas Marner) but the ‘spirit of the age’ in human (and, arguably, inhuman) form. Hard heads, hard hearts, good business. Soft heads and soft hearts lead to the bankruptcy court, Scrooge would have said. Dickens disagreed.”

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As I have just pointed out, the hard-hearted nature of industrialization is represented in Ebenezer Scrooge. He is not just an individual lonely, miserly character, but he represents the spirit of the age in all its humanity. Scrooge would have believed that what is the need of the hour is hard-heartedness, hearts that does not soften towards the needy because he believes that the hard heart leads to good business and that is what is represented in the character of Scrooge, how Dickens disagreed with that philosophy and he does something which is in his power to transform the hard-hearted nature of Scrooge.



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## Industrialism and Child Labour



- “Children worked, like slaves, in Manchester factories (as Michael Slater points out, the chimneys in the background of John Leech’s illustration of the destitute children ‘Ignorance and Want’ are more reminiscent of Manchester’s industrial landscape than of London streets). Six months after [A Christmas Carol](#) was published the 1844 Factories Act decreed, however, that 9–13 year olds could only work nine hours a day, six days a week. This was regarded as a humane reform.”

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One thing that has to be acknowledged is that there was a massive prevalence of child labour during the industrial revolution in Great Britain. And the critic Michael Slater points out that the illustration in A Christmas Carol, there is one way you can see the chimneys of factories in the background and that illustration pertains to the representation of two destitute children, Ignorance and Want, who are embodiments of those two qualities. The children represent Ignorance and Want, and in that illustration, there are images of chimneys and Slater argues that this image is representative of Manchester factories rather than London streets.

And six months after the publication of A Christmas Carol, there is a very influential reform. There is a change in the Factories Act, and that states that 9-13 year olds cannot work more than nine hours a day, and six days a week. So, one can connect Dickens’ writing to this kind of social reform.

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## Crippled Children



- “Why were they wanted for this work? Children were cheap labour but, more importantly, their fingers were small and dexterous. But the machines were dangerous. There were crippled Tiny Tims by the hundred in Manchester.”



Text Source: (John Sutherland, 2014)

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Why did the industries employ children?

“Why were they wanted for this work? Children were cheap labour, but more importantly, their fingers were small and dexterous, but the machines were dangerous. There were crippled Tiny Tims by the 100 in Manchester.” You can see the connections making sense when you read all these social contexts to A Christmas Carol. Children were employed by the masters of factories because children were firstly cheap labour. They had very dexterous fingers, which were helpful in the process of producing materials. Despite their ideal characteristics, children were also negatively affected by the dangerous machines. They got crippled and that statement that there are plenty of Tiny Tims in Manchester is really disturbing. Children are crippled, turned into sub-human beings by these dangerous machines. Children are Gothicised in some sense by these industrial changes in society.

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## Readerly Response



- “The modern reader – of whatever age – is less sensitive to sentimentality than our Victorian forebears. At Dickens’s readings from his novels, audiences would regularly be moved to open tears by, for example, the death of Little Nell in *The Old Curiosity Shop*, or the murder of Nancy in *Oliver Twist*. One suspects that many Victorian tears were shed over the foreseen (but happily forestalled) death of Tiny Tim.”

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Victorians were very sentimental, unlike modern readers. They easily cried. They were moved by the deaths of Little Nell, the child who was struggling very hard to take care of her old grandfather. And likewise, Nancy, who looks after *Oliver Twist*, is somebody who also moves the audience to tears when she dies in a gruesome manner. In the case of Tiny Tim in *A Christmas Carol*, that death is expected but happily it does not happen because there is a radical transformation in Ebenezer Scrooge.

The child characters, as I have been discussing over the lectures, are important figures. It is easy to bring them forward and make the reader see the impact that the industrial transformation is having on these tiny bodies and spirits. How their innocence is negatively affected by the rapid change in industrial revolution and progress. And Dickens is very shroud in the way he utilizes these child characters in his novella, especially the representation of Ignorance and Want in the form of children does work really powerfully in the mind of the readers when they read their destitute nature.

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## Comic, Grotesque and Allegorical



- “The ghosts in *A Christmas Carol* are by turns comic, grotesque and allegorical. Professor John Mullan reflects on their essential role in developing the novel’s meaning and structure.
- There had been ghosts in literature before the Victorians, but the ghost story as a distinct and popular genre was the invention of the Victorians. [Charles Dickens](#) was hugely influential in establishing the genre’s popularity – not only as a writer but also as an editor: his journals *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* specialised in ghost stories, and other contemporary journals followed.”

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The ghosts, the spirits are supernatural beings in *A Christmas Carol* are not one dimensional. You can argue that they are very funny, they are grotesque, bizarre, and they also symbolize other values. They are allegorical and they represent certain qualities.

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John Mullan, the critic argues that the ghost story is an invention of the Victorians. And in fact, Dickens had played a massive role in establishing the generic quality of this ghost narrative. Both as a writer and as an editor, he not only wrote ghost stories, but he also encouraged the publication of ghost stories in his journals such as *Household Words* and *All the Year Round*.

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## 'A Hankering After Ghosts'



- "Dickens's close friend and biographer John Forster said that the novelist had 'a hankering after ghosts'. Not that Dickens exactly believed in ghosts – but he was intrigued by our belief in them. In [A Christmas Carol](#) (1843), the first of his ghost stories, he harnesses that belief by making the supernatural a natural extension of the real world of Scrooge and his victims. This is a long way from the spectres of earlier Gothic fiction."

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Dickens loved tales with ghosts in them. In fact, he had a proclivity towards ghosts. That is what is mentioned by John Forster, his friend and biographer. And in fact, *A Christmas Carol* is the first of his ghost stories, and in that story, what he does is the world of the ghost becomes an extension of the real world. There is no massive division between the real world and the Gothic world, the world of supernatural.

When that destitute woman is sitting outside Scrooge’s county house with all these ghosts of businessmen dancing around her, you cannot differentiate reality and the spiritual world. There is a natural blend of the two, and this has a very, very powerful impact on the readers. Dickens will go on to make further explorations in the world of ghost stories, but this very first experiment of Dickens in a ghost story is fantastic and very powerful.

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## The terrible and the comic



- “The first strictly supernatural sight in the story is the door knocker on the outside door of Scrooge's chambers that metamorphoses, as the miser looks at it, into the face of his former partner, Jacob Marley, dead for seven years. 'The hair curiously stirred, as if by breath or hot-air; and though the eyes were wide open, they were perfectly motionless.'”

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“The first strictly supernatural sight in the story is the door knocker on the outside door of Scrooge’s chambers that metamorphoses, as the miser looks at it, into the face of his former partner, Jacob Marley, dead for seven years. The hair curiously stirred, as if by breath or hot air; and though the eyes were wide open, they were perfectly motionless.”

You can see how gradually Dickens builds up the Gothic characteristics of the setting. In fact, the knocker on the door of Scrooge’s chamber changes into the face of his former partner, Jacob Marley, who has been dead for seven years. And look at the way Dickens describes the door knocker, which looks like the face of Marley. The hair seems to stir as if somebody is breathing and/or it could be because of hot air and the eyes. Even though they are wide open, they are perfectly motionless, they are frozen. So, there is an eagerness to this kind of description. On the one hand, they could be very comic as well if you think about it in a light-hearted way, but at the same time, they are grotesque. So, this is the nature of ‘the terrible’ in the hands of Charles Dickens, a terrible can at any moment become comic and grotesque.

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## The Horrible and the Comic



- “Yet Dickens’s sense of fantasy brings the horrible and comic together: in the surrounding gloom, the face has ‘a dismal light about it, like a bad lobster in a dark cellar’. The weird mix of the terrible and the comic is kept up when Marley’s ghost finally appears carrying its chain of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks and the like. Like a parody ghost, its body is transparent, as Scrooge observes. ‘Scrooge had often heard it said that Marley had no bowels, but he had never believed it until now’ (Stave 1).”

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“Yet Dickens’s sense of fantasy brings the horrible and comic together: in the surrounding gloom, the face has a dismal light about it, like a bad lobster in a dark cellar. The weird mix of the terrible and the comic is kept up when Marley’s ghost finally appears carrying its chain of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks and the like. Like a parody ghost, its body is transparent, as Scrooge observes. ‘Scrooge had often heard it said that Marley had no bowels, but he had never believed it until now’.”

Once again, there is a nice comic blend of the horrible and the funny. There is dismal light in that room, it is gloomy, it is bleak, but yet the face looks like a bad lobster that immediately brings a laugh to the person looking at that image, yet in a dark cellar-like setting. So you can see that a strange combination of the terrible and the comic is kind of kept up by Dickens’s narrative until the appearance of Marley’s ghost. And even that ghost is like a parody ghost. It is a centric representation of the ghost character because the body is transparent and Scrooge immediately remembers that people said that Marley had no bowels. And he cannot believe it until this particular moment, because he can just see-through and there is nothing inside.

So the ghost is terrible in its visitation yet. The representation of the ghost can also be comic. So this is the nature of the Gothic that one can see in A Christmas Carol. The thematic significance could be that if the ghost is too horrible, then Ebenezer Scrooge will just flee in panic and there would be no transformatory work being done on his psyche by these spiritual presences in this novella.

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## City of spectres and animated objects



- “On Christmas Eve the city is itself a place of spectres where ‘it had not been light all day’. Outside Scrooge’s counting house, the fog is so dense ‘that although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms’. The bell in a nearby church tower strikes the hours and quarters ‘as if its teeth were chattering in its frozen head up there.’”

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“On Christmas Eve, the city is itself a place of spectres, where it had not been light all day. Outside Scrooge’s county house, the fog is so dense that although the court was of the narrowest, the houses opposite were mere phantoms. The bell in a nearby church tower strikes the hours and quarters as if its teeth were chattering in its frozen up head up there.”

London in itself becomes a place of spectres or ghosts, and there had been no light the entire day. And outside of Scrooge’s county house, the fog is so dense that one cannot see anything outside very distinctly. In fact, everything looked like a spirit. The houses look like spirits hanging about, and the church tower nearby when it strikes the hour, it looked as if, it felt as if its teeth were chattering in its head.

So, you can see how there is a very powerful representation of the city as a ghost and the people as spirits. So that makes this novella a very powerful representation of a particular idea that is very thoroughly and grotesquely Gothicized.



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## Fantastic City



- “After Marley’s Ghost has left him, Scrooge looks out of his window and sees ‘the air filled with phantoms’, many of them chained souls who had once been known to Scrooge (Stave 1). It is like a fantastic vision of the city that Scrooge already knows well. Like Macbeth, Scrooge, because of his sins, sees visions that are for him alone.”

- Source: (John Mullan 2014) <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/ghosts-in-a-christmas-carol>
- Image source: John Leech. <https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/ghosts-in-a-christmas-carol>



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Once Marley’s ghost has gone, he just looks at the air around him and it seems to be full of ghosts, spirits and supernatural presences and many of them were bound up souls chained souls that cannot freely move about or speak their hearts. And what is pointed out to the readers by Dickens is that these souls have been known to Scrooge. He was familiar with them once upon a time. So this is a fantastic, really bizarre summary on the vision of the city that Scrooge knows by heart and like Macbeth, who can see visions that are meant for him alone and nobody else around Macbeth could see those ghostly visitations. Just like Macbeth, Scrooge could see these visions that are meant for his eyes alone.

Thank you for watching. I will continue in the next session.