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The Illuminating Power of Christmas: Stories of Community

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"May [this story] haunt [your] houses pleasantly…"

Charles Dickens, Preface for *A Christmas Carol*

"But the greatest beauty about this wonderful tree was the many little lights that sparkled amid its dark bough, which like stars illuminated its treasures, or like friendly eyes seemed to invite the children to partake of its blossoms and fruit."

E.T.A Hoffmann, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*

Foreword

Every year, I listen to Frank Sinatra tell me about "The First Noel." He tells me that the world has been blessed with a savior. His voice is smooth like fine whiskey. I have listened to the same albums every year since I was a little girl. As I hear the first notes float out, whether I am listening through my headphones, standing in a market, lying in my childhood bed, or sitting in my mother's car, I fall back in time and get to live every Christmas again.

"Remember not too big of a tree this year, Chloe," she spoke softly, glancing back to check on me in my car seat. *The First Noel, the Angels did say…* "But Mom, it's Erin's first Christmas since moving to the UK; we have to go all out before she gets home." I glance across from the passenger seat and bat my eyes just like I would when I was eight. *On a cold winter's night that was so deep…* Erin laughs at me from the backseat; her glasses slide up the bridge of her nose as the skin around her eyes, crinkles in joy. The light from the moon reflects off of snowbanks on the earth and snowflakes swirling in the air. *The Shepherds looked up and they saw a bright star…*

I wait for her to lift me out of my car seat; my feet don't touch the ground yet. I leap out of the backseat arguing with Erin— "Let me pick out the tree this year, Sissy, pleeeeeease." I step out of the front seat, determined to find the right tree; a tree that will touch the ceiling. This may be my last time picking out a Christmas tree here. *And to the darken Earth it gave a great light…* It is my first year going with my mom, dad, and sister to pick out a tree. The air smells of pine and fir; the gravel ground is cold with ice crystals forming between each pebble. We stroll the lanes of trees; some are tall and others short, some are skinny and others much too big, but they all will find homes in the coming days. We will bring home the most perfect tree and decide

on a name. Maybe it'll be Fred this year. *Noel, noel, noel, noel…* It was Fred last year, so maybe George this time around.

My dad carries the tree through the front door and fights with the screws in our tree stand. *Shining there in the east, beyond them far…* I carry the tree in for my mom and gently place it in our new tree stand that requires only a couple of pedal pushes. The tree stands in front of the front door. I string up the lights but realize a bulb or two is out. *Born is the king of Israel…* I call my dad and wait for him to pick up the phone, so I can ask him how I can fix this. Erin and I decorate the tree that night; we each put our snowman ornaments with our names on the tree. They light up. *And so it continued through day and through night…* I wait for Erin to get home; I can't decorate without her. I bring the boxes of ornaments labeled in my dad's handwriting up from the basement. They aren't well organized anymore. I lift the lid and see Erin's and my old snowman ornaments. I try to turn one on, but neither works anymore. Our names are faded.

I come home from a playdate late one night; it is already dark when I get home after rehearsal; mom and I pull into the driveway after the long journey from college to home. My red house is covered in snow. *Noel, noel, noel, noel…* Icicles are hanging from the edges of the roof. The lights in the windows, the soft candles that always appear come December, shine brilliantly through the glass. They welcome me home. That small house on a quiet street becomes my home when I see those lights. *Born is the king of Israel…* I walk in the front door hand-in-hand with the infant-self born just three weeks before Christmas, and the little girl who loved the wooden Rudolf on the front step, and the teenager who adored picking out gifts for all of her friends, and the young woman who carries these holiday memories with her all her life. The house is warm. There are the ghosts of childhood friends singing and different versions of my Oma floating through the kitchen cooking *Spätzle* and *Rouladen*. I see my older sister as a little girl dancing in

the sunroom in her Clara tutu. I see my father setting the table. There are the spirits of the adults that once held me placing presents under a brilliant tree. *The First Noel, the angels did say…*

Everything, every year, every Christmas becomes one.

Introduction

Christmas is an almost universal experience in the Western world. Its symbolism as a moment of community and connection reveals the human need to be with one another and fight our greatest fear—loneliness. Christmas is one of many winter festivals around the globe that demonstrate this need for connection, but because of Western media and culture it has become a holiday celebrated within and outside of the Christian faith and thus reaches a wide audience. It is a time when people come together to perform the same rituals every year and reflect. Christmas is a dedicated time to celebrate the ways in which we have forged communities and honor these bonds. The study of Christmas allows readers to understand the ways in which humans create collectives because Christmas occurs during a time of year best known for death and darkness, Christmas stories remind readers that there is light everywhere, in each of us.

The history of Christmas begins long before Jesus Christ's birth, but its history contains contradictory theories. Many scholars associate Christmas with the Roman celebration of Saturnalia. This holiday occurred on the 17th of December, near the winter solstice, and although the festival transpired on a single day, the festivities often lasted for several days (Michels 11). Included in the festivities was "a *convivium publicum*, a feast… provided out of public funds for all citizens… best known… [for its] (temporary) freedom of slaves, who sat at banquets with their masters and enjoyed relaxed discipline" (Michels 11). This feast signals the first principle of Christmas: a time for generosity and giving to those in need. This ideal is rooted in the principle of equalizing social classes but later comes to connote parents giving to their children, those usually in a subordinate position. The Romans also gifted one another presents during Saturnalia, including candles (Michels 11). Light, candles, fire, warmth come to be their own motifs through Christmas literature, signaling the challenge of how one can brighten a dark

seasonal time of year. The need for light comes from the need for human connection; just as our solar system revolves around the earth, humans revolve around where there is warmth and light, which is usually within community. Not all scholars agree that this holiday led to today's Christmas celebrations. C.P.E. Nothaft, Professor of History for All Souls College at Oxford University, in "The Origins of the Christmas Date: Some Recent Trends in Historical Research" summarizes many different scholars' theories regarding the date of Christmas. However, throughout he notes the connections between pagan sun worship and the Christmas holiday (905-906). Sun worship will be a leitmotif through this paper as light acts as a foundational principle for our understanding of Christmas.

Christmas was recreated during the 1800s into a holiday focused on children. During this period, E.T.A. Hoffmann and Dickens both created their foundational texts, respectively, *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* (1816) and *A Christmas Carol* (1843). Stephen Nissenbaum, professor of History at the University of Massachusetts Amherst, defines that in the early 19th century, "[t]he domestication of Christmas was thus related (as both effect and cause) to the creation of domesticity and of 'childhood' itself" (110). To Nissenbaum, Christmas and the idea of childhood are fundamentally intertwined, enabling Christmas literature to examine the domestic space of the home and familial relationships in an intimate way. Pintard highlights many figures involved with the creation of modern Christmas in his book, *The Battle for Christmas*; the multiplicity of figures demonstrates how many different figures performed this work in unique ways. The result of this transformative work is a transatlantic shift (CG 3). Judith Flanders, a historian focused on the Victorian period, notes in her book, *Christmas: A Biography*, that many countries believe they celebrate Christmas the correct way and others can only emulate (3). However, as the historical material demonstrates, this new era of Christmas was

created by many cultures separately across the globe at the same time. Christmas becomes a holiday that transcends religious contexts and earns the moniker of a festival for all people celebrating the enduring power of human connection.

In this paper, I explore multiple written texts and films to map the repetition of tropes and ideals across centuries and cultures. Key elements of a Christmas tale include light, magic, generosity, and wonder. Light symbolizes the awareness of both those around an individual and the comfort connection can give; magic represents the transformations possible because of Christmas; each story provides moments in which abundance and generosity are paired to showcase the important behaviors within one's community; and wonder is the indescribable emotional response one has when overwhelmed with the beauty and power of Christmas, evoking the child-spirit in each of us. *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* (1816) appears first in the canon. This story predates *A Christmas Carol* (1843), and yet showcases how many of the foundational Christmas ideals Dickens describes can be applied to those young and old. Hoffmann highlights how Christmas doctrine is translated into a narrative for children. *A Christmas Carol* and Dickens, instead, focuses on teaching adult readers about these motifs. Dickens also explores the question of whom this holiday is meant for and how to maintain the teachings of Christmas all year long. *A Christmas Carol* is credited as fundamental to our modern holiday, and so its teachings will be treated as such. Dickens' essays "What Christmas Is, As We Grow Older" (1851) and "A Christmas Tree" (1850) offer a perspective on how these ideals translate into more personal narratives. Pivoting to the 20th century and to the genre of film, *It's A Wonderful Life* (1947) investigates how the idea of generosity can be retained throughout the year and the importance of both giving and receiving care. And finally, *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947) and *Coyote Christmas* (2007), a Lakota picture book, highlight how these

lessons and figures are not only refocused toward children but also translated into other cultures. These motifs are able to transverse time and cultures because all humans can resonate with the need for connection, especially during darker seasons.

Humans are not designed as solitary animals; we desire and need one another to function and thrive. The darkness represents the inability to see one another or our surroundings, but in the light, we are able to find our community. Humans have created warmth and light as a comfort and escape from solitude; without candles or light bulbs, we would often be in darkness. The human need for light derives from the need to know and, thus, feel safe. When the world presents us with less natural light to illuminate our days, we must create our own light.

Agnes K. Michels notes in her examination of Roman winter festivals that "[t]here seems to be something about the dead of winter just before the days begin to lengthen noticeably that makes people need to relax and enjoy themselves" (11). Through Christmas literature, one can learn how to maintain the holiday's characteristic ideals throughout the year, and why it is important to do so. Christmas and its stories are one section of a larger canon of festivals focused on humans creating warmth during the dark months of solstice. This essay ultimately explores the ideals of Christmas and why they retain such a power in the human psyche across time, cultures, and ideologies. It is my contention that these narratives, although within a Christian context, reveal something deeper about the human condition: that we all need community, care, and light.

How Children Learn to Understand Christmas

During the curation of modern Christmas, the focus of the holiday shifts from a societal ritual to a familial, child-centric holiday, especially in Germany.[1] Children become the main receivers of presents and holiday generosity rather than the poorer classes. The first child of Christmas, Jesus Christ himself was the one to receive gifts, and so it is apt that this holiday has been reimagined to focus on children.[2] E.T.A. Hoffmann wrote *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King* in 1816 Prussia, reimagining holiday themes and ideals for the wondrous world of childhood. Despite pre-dating Dickens, who is credited with forming much of the modern celebration known today, Hoffmann presents Christmas ideals that align with those established in *A Christmas Carol*. This story is everything a child would want: food, magic, and excitement, and throughout Hoffmann weaves important motifs of Christmas like light in abundance, darkness, and generosity. One illustrator of Hoffmann's many publications, Maria Mikhalskaya, notes that "[i]n [Hoffmann]'s world, there's a place for everything—the most unbelievable ideas and characters, on an unbelievable scale" (80). Hoffmann writes for a young audience and excels at this practice. Maria Tatar notes in her article, "Inventing Portal Fantasies: E.T.A. Hoffmann's *The Nutcracker and the Mouse King*," that those who write for children must understand the need to arouse curiosity, and Hoffmann's text does just that. Hoffmann reimagines traditional Christmas themes for a child's imagination and creates one of the first holiday stories specifically for children.

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[1] In her book, Flanders explores how English poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge's story about a family in Germany spread throughout England and sparked an interest in translated copies of German Christmas children's stories (107, 109). This narrative of exchange and interest in German children's literature mirrors the popularity of Hoffmann's work. Not only was it translated into hundreds of languages, but also turned into a ballet.

[2] In the King James Bible, Matthew 2:11 reads: "they presented unto him gifts; gold, and frankincense, and myrrh." Through this scripture, it is clear that Christ the child was bestowed gifts. But Christ not only received but gave on Christmas as well. As Luke 2:11 reads, "For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord." Jesus arrives as a gift and dedicates his existence on this earth to giving to, healing, and saving those around him.

Hoffmann speaks directly to his reader, creating a sense that this story is meant to be read aloud and emphasizing that this tale is intended for small ears to hear. The narrator draws the audience in closer to the story by using phrases like "[y]ou understand my kind and good readers and listeners" (26).[3] Hoffmann also has his narrator refer to his audience specifically as "children," (68).[4] The mention of both readers and listeners and calling them children indicates that Hoffmann intends his story for both younger children who cannot read and older children who can. By using a narrator who is able to break the fourth wall, Hoffmann clearly reveals his intention behind writing this piece.

Nutcracker explores major winter and Christmas themes of dark and light, cold and warm through Maria confronting different meanings and forms of light. Maria and her brother, Frederic, open the story "nestled together in a corner of the back chamber… they felt quite gloomy… no light was brought in to them" (6). The siblings begin in darkness separate from the family, representing the cold, lonely, wintertime before Christmas warmth and their family illuminate the home. At once "the doors flew wide open, and such a dazzling light broke out from the great chamber… [their mother says] 'Come, come, dear children, and see what Christmas has brought you this year'" (9). There is no mention of Santa Claus, as he hasn't been solidified as a character yet in the Christmas canon, but the room sparkles with the prospect awakened by the idea of gifts. It is as if the Christmas spirit has lit all the candles and fireplaces inside the house. Hoffmann describes the tree itself being adorned with lights, which look like "stars illuminat[ing] its treasures, or like friendly eyes seem[ing] to invite the children to partake

[3] Dickens in *A Christmas Carol* emulates this style as he switches between first- and third-person narration, occasionally taking an opportunity to speak directly to his audience to call their attention back to the haunting on the page.

[4] Unlike many child-centric tales from this time period resulting in negative endings with morals to learn, this story offers a happy ending for its protagonist. Mikhalskaya notes that as a child she "somehow knew that everything was going to be fine" for the Nutcracker (78).

of its blossoms and fruit" (10). Their mother is the figure who opens the doors and facilitates both the wonderous light and sweets. Wonder is the light in the children's eyes as they gaze upon the tree and stare in astonishment at the apparent magic the holiday and their parents have created for them. Hoffmann is reimagining the winter festival's devotion to light and solstice in a new way as to connect to a generation of children to whom Christmas will always prove to be a family holiday.

Hoffmann also uses the metaphor of light to create darker moments throughout the narrative, in turn creating a doubled meaning for this traditional motif. During the first battle between the mice and the Nutcracker, the entrance of the mice is depicted through their shining eyes: "A thousand little lights flashed out of the crevices in the floor… they were sparkling little eyes, and Maria perceived that mice were all around" (23). These are not the inviting eyes of the candles balancing on the boughs of the Christmas tree; instead, they are the invading force entering Maria's safety. The light here represents the shocking nature of thousands of mice streaming rather than the warmth of her mother's words and family's actions; the light is blinding rather than illuminating. Hoffmann thus here plays with traditional conventions of Christmas to push boundaries and reimagine these narratives for children.

Light is not the only traditional element Hoffmann uses; the abundance and jovial nature attached to food and drink are also central to this children's narrative.[5] Maria notes that the lit room she walks into is "covered with gold and silver apples… sugar almonds, comfits, lemon drops, and every kind of confectionery," and these are just the treats displayed on the tree (10). Maria's parents gift her many sweet treats and prizes. Tatar notes that Hoffmann "links candy

[5] Traditionally, at Christmastime, landowners would give food or drink to their tenants in good faith that they will work hard the next year. This tradition was transformed into the home feasts as the holiday moved away from the concern of social class to children as their own class of people.

confections with beauty and visual pleasure… [and] that children's eyes open wider in pastry shops than in art galleries" (26). Here, Tatar emphasizes the importance of these treats, which highlights how Maria's sacrifice of her own candy means even more to Hoffmann's child-audience than adult readers. However, her friendship with the Nutcracker supersedes the importance of these goods, as demonstrated by her relinquishing them to the Mouse King in order to save her Nutcracker. She gives up her sugar-plums and gingerbread (61), two sweets later highlighted in the ballet adaptation of Hoffmann's story.[6] Hoffmann is not only showcasing the expected tradition Christmas sweets, but also how Maria's generosity outweighs her childish, selfish desire for candy—again highlighting an important Christmas value.

Hoffmann does not ignore how special Maria's sweet treats are to her; instead, he highlights the emotional impact this sacrifice has for a little girl. Maria is allowed to shed a tear as she gives up her sweets but recognizes that "'[t]hat is nothing, if Nutcracker is only saved'" (63). Of course, her Nutcracker is saved, and later in the story the two visit his realm together. They travel through magic realms of different sweets including "'Gingerbreadville… which lies on Molasses River. Very pretty people live in it, but they are a little ill-tempered, because they suffer a good deal from toothache'" (71). Hoffmann uses magic and playful humor to demonstrate the importance of these treats to Maria. Tatar notes that, when writing children's literature, it is most important to provide an escape from boredom (24). The path into the other world of the Nutcracker and Sugar Plum fairies provides this escape physically for Hoffmann's characters—and his readers. The joy and hardship that candy brings to Maria represents the emotions that many children experience during holiday time. Sweets are a major part of the

[6] Tchaikovsky's ballet version of Hoffmann's tale would reach global audiences, performing everywhere from Russia to the United States to Sweden. The ballet itself has become a familial tradition. I, myself, saw *The Nutcracker* as a little girl. I even had a tutu dress with a music box sewn in that played the "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies."

Christmas holiday, especially in Hoffmann's Germanic world.[7] When Maria and her Nutcracker arrive at his palace, "finest fruits and sugar-things, such as Maria had never seen before" greet them (81). Maria is rewarded with these treats as she has given up her original sweets to help the Nutcracker. Hoffmann's narrative teaches children the importance of giving and that good will return to the generous just as it does for Maria.

Maria demonstrates throughout *Nutcracker* the idea of generosity and self-sacrifice that the Christmas spirit requires of all celebrants, and Hoffmann composes a story that allows a young girl to be a hero, teaching children that they can enact this virtue from a young age. Maria is the only child who cares about the Nutcracker; he is a smaller, less desirable toy, but something about him speaks to Maria (14). Her father even entrusts the care of the small statue to Maria specifically, although noting the other children may use him as well (16). The care Maria takes when picking out which nuts to crack or how to play with the Nutcracker reveals her gentle nature; she is a character who can act as an ideal for Hoffmann's young audience. She is a heroic character who gives to and cares about others.[8] As Tatar examines, "Hoffmann [is] ahead of his time in crafting a children's story that [features] the importance of friendship, loyalty, and resourcefulness" (29). Whether it is giving up her sweets or throwing her shoe, Maria's actions

[7] Sweets retain their importance in the Christmas story canon after Hoffmann's tale. In the poem, *A Visit from St. Nicholas*, better known as *Twas the Night before Christmas* (1823), Clement Clarke Moore writes, "While visions of sugar-plums danced in their heads" (4). Sugar plums are a traditional sweet of preserved fruit covered in chocolate (Bowler 217). This line emphasizes that the dreams of children during Christmas time are full of sweets. This imagery later comes to connote the *Nutcracker* ballet (1892) as the Sugar Plum fairy dance is a major moment.

[8] Maria's actions demonstrate the behavior Dickens sets up Scrooge to emulate after his three ghostly visitors. However, the distinction in social class is important to note. Maria is born into a life of privilege, whereas Scrooge must work to gain the status Maria is born into. Scrooge may not have the luxury to be as giving as Maria at such a young age.

are simple but impactful. Hoffmann is teaching his child audience that this is the kind of care-work required of those who embody Christmas year-round.[9]

Maria awakens in her own bed after falling asleep in Marchpane Castle, and those around her believe that her adventures with the Nutcracker were but a dream. Perhaps an adult audience would think the same, but the children for whom Hoffmann wrote may be able to believe the story more and hope that the same narratives be true about themselves. Tatar notes that "Hoffmann understood how to capture the imagination of the child" (27). Hoffmann allows this story to take Christmas ideals into a childlike realm of wonder while maintaining the important lessons to be learned from the holiday. Light and dark, selflessness and bounty all appear throughout this work. This Prussian author wrote a children's book that continues to teach children about how the principles of Christmas can shape their understanding of the world.

Dickens' Ghosts as Embodied Christmas Ideals

Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol* laid the foundations of modern Christmas ideals. Dickens crafts three spirits that embody the major themes and motifs for the Christmas that he envisions the world could celebrate. Dickens sees a holiday full of magic, warmth, and light, but also one of truth, death, and darkness. He reminds readers that this complex holiday was for all generations to learn from and to guide them in their daily lives. Joshua Dobbs, Associate Professor of English at Odessa College, expands this Christmas story to non-Christian readers by interpreting Dickens' ghosts as fairies from tales of folklore (436). Dobbs' reading of Dickens' work stems from the Christmas tradition of oral storytelling in the 18th century (438). The Ghost of Christmas Past embodies the light that people attempt to bring into the dark winter months

[9] Mikhalskaya notes that, as she crafted new illustrations for this story, it was "as if a kind of fairy from Hoffmann's fairy tales was taking care of [her]" (79). This notion echoes the idea that Christmas will provide and take care of those who hold fast to its ideals throughout the year.

through Christmas celebrations; Past[10] also suspends time as he is both a child and a man, demonstrating how the holiday remains relevant for peoples of all ages. The Ghost of Christmas Present is a generous giant who represents the bounty and abundance of Christmas, and yet he also represents the temporality of the holiday and its concealed fallacies. The final spirit, The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, showcases the darker aspects of the holiday; he is darkness, death, and silence embodied, but he is also the brightest ghost as he illuminates the truth of human behavior. These ghosts aid Scrooge in forming a conscience and beginning a more social life through the ideals of the Christmas holiday (Smith 48); this story is fundamentally one of transformation through the magic of the Ghosts. Dickens lays the foundations for many holiday works that follow and reflects the work of those that came before him; understanding his Ghosts as embodied Christmas ideals is to understand what Christmas truly comes to mean for Western society.

Dickens focuses on the motif of light and candles with the Ghost of Christmas Past, possibly referencing the notion of illuminating the past, but also establishing that, during Christmas time, one is meant to bring light into the darkness. The primary descriptions of Past all focus on light. "Light flashed up the room" begins Past's presence in Scrooge's story. Past is described as being candle-esque. His purpose is to illuminate the past, and as Past leads Scrooge through the "shadows of the past," Past shows him the people he once knew. He sees loved ones from years past that are no longer in the light, but the darkness. They are the shadows of the community Scrooge once had. As Past emanates light, he still retains a way to snuff himself out. Scrooge notices "a great extinguisher for a cap… held under its arm" (62). An important detail,

[10] I have decided to refer to the three Ghosts as if their time period were their first name because they are the physical embodiment of these times. They are Past, Present, and Yet to Come themselves. They are not simply the Ghost of this moment in time, as Dobbs explores in his reading of *A Christmas Carol*. The Ghosts can be many creatures. For my understanding of their characterization, they are embodied time.

this cap represents that this light and warmth can be shunned and diminished if a person so wishes; Christmas is meant to bring light into the darkness but just as candle's fire is fragile, so is the luminosity that Christmas brings into people's lives. Past does not retain perfect brilliance—like a candle he fluctuates in his "distinctiveness" (62); this instability again reinforces the delicacy of light. This Ghost could be extinguished but remains bright and brilliant so long as his host, Scrooge, allows him.

Past underscores who Christmas is meant for, as he appears to be both an old man and a child. There is an argument to be made that this characterization of Past is because he cumulatively represents all of Scrooge's past. However, Past may also reflect the greater narrative that this holiday can be celebrated by all no matter their age. Past is "like a child: yet not so like a child as like an old man" (61). He retains some characteristics of an adolescent, such as soft skin, yet he also wears the white hair of an aged man (61-62). These juxtaposing characteristics offer insight into the full range of who may be able to express the joy and warmth of the Christmas holiday, as Past does. Past suggests that all men, women, and children, young and old, are a part of the holiday celebration. Andrew Smith argues that these ghosts "exist to engender compassion as well as fear" in his piece for the *Victorian Review* entitled "Dickens' Ghosts: Invisible Economies and Christmas" (43). A half-man-half-child figure is uncanny and unsettling for Scrooge to look upon and readers to envision, but as Smith asserts, the uneasy feeling is tied to the form of a spirit. However, unnerving the figure may be, the light that Past offers can symbolize the ability of both man and child to emanate the Christmas spirit. Past offers this possibility to Scrooge as a way to understand the bounty that the Christmas holiday retains. This holiday is not for one social class nor one gender nor one age; Christmas exists in all who hold the holiday in their heart.

Past's ending with Scrooge allows Dickens to imagine the rejection of light during the Christmas holiday as well. At the close of the Second Stave, Scrooge extinguishes the spirit by pressing down the cap; however, "though Scrooge pressed it down with all his force, he could not hide the light" (76). Light always finds a way to shine. Scrooge may refuse the light and fellowship of the world and all it could bring him at first, but Past remains brilliant until the end. Dobbs notes that Past also carries a piece of holly; this detail is important to Dobbs because of holly's strong connection to fairies (441). Fairies allegedly would shelter under this plant during winter months (441). This detail symbolizes the protection that the light seeks to give; Past as a candle offers warmth and support to Scrooge as much as Past is determined to help him change. His light cannot be put out by one Scrooge, so to say. His joy and warmth are caused by many people's existences, not just Scrooge's. Through his magical journey to days gone by, Past brings Scrooge to the threshold of change and enables the next spirits to complete Scrooge's transformation.

In the following stave, the Ghost of Christmas Present appears atop a mountain of food, demonstrating the abundance that the holiday brings. The plentitude and enormity of this Ghost symbolize the holiday season as a time of feasting and merriment. Present illuminates Scrooge's world, just as the last spirit does, but he also beckons Scrooge into the adjoining room: "'Come in!' exclaimed the Ghost. 'Come in! and know me better, man!" (80). Present's call to Scrooge invites him into the world of revelry and implores him to not only see the ghost but to *know* him. He is welcomed to this world complete with a bounty,

> Heaped up upon the floor, to form a kind of throne, were turkeys, geese, game, poultry… mince-pies, plum-puddings, barrels of oysters, red-hot chestnuts, cherry-cheeked

> apples… immense twelfth-cakes, and seething bowls of punch, that made the chamber dim with her delicious steam. (79)

This tower of food represents the ideal Christmas meal where no man can want for anything. Through Present's transformation of Scrooge's dull, dark home, Scrooge first glimpses the ideal material Christmas, yet as they explore the city, this "glorious to see" giant blesses homes and gives to those in need (79). His abundance coupled with generosity teaches Scrooge and Dickens' readers what is expected of those in positions of affluence. It is not enough to have a room full of delicious treats; if one does not share with those in need, one cannot truly fulfill the Christmas ideal.

Dickens does not allow Present to be everlasting; just as the present moment is fleeting, so is the Christmas holiday and thus the Ghost of Christmas Present's life. Dickens hints throughout Present's journey with Scrooge that he has limited time; the spirit notes when visiting Tiny Tim that, if nothing changes, none of his race will find Tim there, asserting that he himself will not see Tiny Tim again (89). Present's fleeting life of abundance reminds readers of the importance of appreciating the present moment and the brief reprieve that the Christmas holiday gives the world. Smith argues that "[Dickens] is better at identifying social problems than he is at formulating solutions to them" (40). This assertion fails to consider that Dickens is providing a lesson in generosity and the common good through teaching society how Christmas should be celebrated and kept alive all year long. The holiday is a moment to gather both foods and attitudes to create a day or a season of abundance, light, and joy. Present's life is but one night just as Christmas is but one night (99). This brief but fulfilling time needs to be honored to receive all the greatness that it can bring into one's life.

Dickens complicates the joy surrounding this Ghost's presence; just before Present dies, he reveals two monstrous children from under his cloak who demonstrate plenty's antonym. The children, a boy and a girl, are described as "[y]ellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish… Where graceful youth should have filled their features out… a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds" (100-101). These figures named Want and Ignorance are Man's children (101). These characters remind readers of the importance of selflessness during the holiday season. When desire turns into greed and selfishness, these children will appear. Community must extend past those within one's immediate circle and welcome those less advantaged to the table as well. Present uses his magic to show Scrooge both the beautiful and the dark sides to Christmas and human nature; such knowledge aids in Scrooge's transformation because he is magically faced with reality. There is duality between these two children and the body of the spirit from which they come. Present is a giant described as both clothed in a luscious robe and bare chested (80); Dobbs notes that he is "strangely Dionysian" (445). His body bridges those with wealth and without. The two children are a warning of the consequences of overindulging instead of aiding poorer neighbors. Present teaches readers that looking out for those in need is a fundamental promise of the Christmas holiday, but it is also an obligation that can be quickly forgotten.

Just as Dickens allows Present, the spirit who appears to represent the most joy, to explore darker aspects of the Christmas holiday, Dickens enables the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come—who perfectly demonstrates the darker aspects of Christmas—to also teach Scrooge that Christmas can represent the light and camaraderie of man. Yet to Come is a dark figure; he enters the novel as "a solemn Phantom, draped and hooded, coming, like a mist along the ground" (101). This ominous entrance establishes immediately that Yet to Come will be a more

ominous spirit than the first two. He is unlike the light that Past brings or the abundance that Present supplies; Yet to Come embodies all that people hope to escape from through Christmas, but all that we must embrace to truly understand this holiday.

Yet to Come is a non-verbal spirit, yet his journey with Scrooge amplifies what a world without the music and sound of Christmas would become. By lifting his finger and pointing, Yet to Come instructs Scrooge through the future. Silent nods of the shrouded head act as the only assurance. Dobbs notes that this is the singular Ghost to not declare its own name, and instead allows Scrooge to name him (449). This subtle shift showcases how Scrooge is the master of his own fate and creates his own future. Unsettled by this uncanny figure, Scrooge wishes to remove his covering but thinks better of it (109). This eerie silence juxtaposes the abundance that Scrooge meets in Present; the refusal to speak represents both the unknown future and the haunting quality of Christmas. The magical journey Scrooge has been on with these supernatural beings comes to a pinnacle with Yet to Come's darker, magical journey to the potential future. Christmas is associated with music, laughter, kettles whistling, and bells tolling,[11] but here Yet to Come has removed all these comforts to confront Scrooge with the reality of a world without the human connection that Christmas can provide.

Dickens also uses Yet to Come to explore the closeness between Christmas and death, both through Scrooge's confrontation of his own death and the haunting nature of Yet to Come. Scrooge is forced to listen to people discussing his dead body and to see his own headstone to understand the severity of his selfishness. Yet to Come and the other Ghosts have used their magical journeys to enable Scrooge's power of choice with full awareness of societal conditions;

[11] Dickens is fascinated with the motif of music and bells at Christmas. This specific focus is emphasized in his New Year's short story, "The Chimes," that is broken into quarters and follows a man's connection to the bells in a church's steeple, or as he calls them "Old Chimes" (56).

Scrooge can now reflect on who he has been and would like to be. He begins to find fault with those who disregard death and laugh at it with disgust (109), whereas previously Scrooge speaks of death as a solution for the surplus population (45). By bringing death into the story, Dickens is noting that death and ghosts live within the joyous bright Christmas holiday; it is as if the veil between the spirit realm and earth lifts, allowing humans to peek at death and remain grateful for their present lives. Yet to Come haunts the streets and Scrooge. He is a "great heap of black" (102), and when he disappears, he shrinks into Scrooge's bedpost (117). Unlike Past who is extinguished or Present who disappears, Yet to Come remains. This spirit still haunts Scrooge as the future always looms over everyone. Scrooge does not vanquish Yet to Come as he tries to overcome Past; Scrooge cannot outrun death or the future forever, but he is now able to change his end.

Charles Dickens creates a foundation from which many great Christmas stories draw. Through his Ghosts, Dickens explores many different ideals and traditions, and solidifies some into the iconography of Christmas. Dobbs associates Dickens' ghosts with fairies, who are both playful and dangerous, and emphasizes the multiplicity that characterizes these spirits and the Christmas holiday (440). Christmas today encompasses Past's light and fluctuation, Present's temporal abundance and warning, and Yet to Come's death and haunting. Smith proposes that one can "read the story against the supernatural grain"; however, to do this would be to ignore potentially Dickens' most important literary choice. Dickens chose to set this tale within a supernatural world, so he may express all that shapes Christmas ideals, including magic. The transformation of Scrooge derives from the mythical experience of these three spirits, who continue to haunt Christmas stories, showcasing how Christmas and its figures can implore society and its inhabitants to change.

A Lesson in Christmas Reinforced

In 1843, Charles Dickens taught the world that Christmas was a time to come together with those you love and those in need through his holiday-defining classic *A Christmas Carol*; he solidified his message in 1850 and 1851 when he published two shorter essays "What Christmas Is, As We Grow Older" and "A Christmas Tree." If *A Christmas Carol* is the teaching, then these two shorter essays encompass the lessons to be learned. *A Christmas Carol* was Dickens' first novella, and he successfully reused this form throughout his career; these essays, however, provide his captive audience with a new way to conceptualize the holiday narrative. Brandon Chitwood in his dissertation for a Doctor of Philosophy at Marquette University reminds readers that Dickens is crafting his idea of Christmas "in response to social anxieties related to the expansion of industrial capitalism" (1). Dickens is fearful of the new direction this celebration is taking and thus dedicates his work to changing its course. Dickens allows readers to glimpse into his own life, to see how these lessons of Christmas shaped him. As with his Ghosts, Dickens explores different important elements of the Christmas holiday. Just as the Ghost of Christmas Past demonstrates the need for light and effort to retain a childlike spirit, Dickens' essays explore the need to retain a childhood wonder. Dickens explores the magic of the season in the real world as he does in Scrooge's constructed world. Charitable acts also take center stage in Dickens' essays as they do in the lessons Scrooge learns with the Ghost of Christmas Present.

Dickens establishes different metaphors for the *movement* of the essays, evoking imagery familiar to his British audience. In "As We Grow Older," Dickens engages the idea of "a magic ring " which wraps around the inner world of the home and encompasses all time (300); this ring unites all of the past, present, and future Christmas holidays into one grand emotion.[12] He refers

[12] Joe Bruchac, Indigenous poet and storyteller, whom I'll engage later, notes that "a circle does not keep you out."

to the "doors and windows closed against the weather, there are flaming logs heaped high, there are joyful faces, there is healthy music of voices" (304); the imagery of the closed points of entry, blockading the harsh winter weather from entering the home, resembles the magic ring that encompasses all memories of Christmas. These elements of protection that block out the dark allow the inner warmth and light of domesticity to shine brighter, connecting the people within the home; Dickens acknowledges that these metaphysical blocks cannot be complete—there will always be a chill drifting, in reminding the warm insiders of cold realities and difficult emotions just as the Ghosts of *A Christmas Carol* do. Similarly, "A Christmas Tree" unfolds as a metaphysical journey toward unattainable perfection. Through this essay, the story flows up a Christmas Tree as if resembling the timeline of Dickens' life. Chitwood notes Dickens' use of personal pronouns as a way of creating closeness between his readers and himself within *A Christmas Carol*, and Dickens again employs this technique in his essays to accurately capture his experience of the world (67). Dickens did not enjoy an easy childhood and may have lacked the holiday joy that he wished to see in the world, so within these essays he explores the past and what he hopes for in the future. Beginning with the "young Christmas days, by which we climbed to real life" (290), Dickens allows his story of a tree to represent both time and space. A physical Christmas tree with its own lifetime will wither and die by early January and live a life much shorter than any celebrant would like. Dickens names the past "Winter Stories," but he reminds himself they are more aptly called "Ghost Stories" (296). *Winter* evokes darkness and death–it surrounds the world with empty trees and muddy brown grass–but it also allows the past to be alive again. We wake up the darkness through the light we bring into it. Through the magic ring and the Christmas tree, Dickens sets up these two stories to be full of the past and present, light and darkness, warmth and coolness, and allows these multiples to exist because Christmas,

although there are specific lessons to be learned from Dickens' conception of the holiday, can never be a singular thing. Christmas is a great multiplicity.

Childhood and child-like wonder are beautifully encapsulated by the Christmas holiday, and Dickens teaches us in *A Christmas Carol* that a youthful outlook is something to be valued and carried on through adulthood. Scrooge exclaims at the end of the novella that he "will live in the Past, the Present, and the Future" (118). The past acts as an important informer to the present. Despite Dickens' difficult childhood, he creates images of wondrous childhoods "assembled round that pretty German toy, a Christmas Tree" (289). Dickens is both crafting the childhood he never had and instructing readers on what Christmas should look like for their children; unlike the hard pasts that both Dickens and his Scrooge endured, the children of Dickens' essays enjoy a sparkling Christmas.[13] Dickens does not fear age and grayness, so long as he is able to retain the beautiful innocence of a child. "Age" becomes a personified figure with which Dickens is able to interact; he writes, "O may I, with a grey head, turn a child's heart to that figure yet, and a child's trustfulness and confidence!" (300). Youth is a revitalizer and allows the present to be a stronger focus than the past. The hopes and ideals of a younger person are invaluable. In "As We Get Older," Dickens reminds readers that "we are… strengthened by the unaccomplished visions of our youth" (302); this profound statement is a strange dichotomy because to be strengthened by something unfinished reads as contradictory. However, Dickens suggests that what we didn't have or couldn't have as young individuals is what we must strive for as adults. So, unable to have a warm and easy childhood as a young boy, Dickens creates a world in which Christmas protects these ideals, as if wrapped in a magic ring, and gives this promise to his readers.

[13] This may have been influenced by *Nutcracker* (1816) as it depicts what an ideal Christmas should look like for children.

Magic and enchantment are a major aspect of modern Christmas, and Dickens' representations of the holiday are enchanting. Dickens chooses moments and objects throughout the Christmas celebration to intensify the mystical. Already a time of darkness and ghosts, Christmas in Dickens' treatment both evokes the spiritual roots and changes the ghostly to be more enigmatic of a golden magic beaming from these different objects. When investigating the ornaments hung on the tree, for example, Dickens notes that these objects are "clustering on the tree like magic fruit, and flashing bright looks directed towards it from every side" (289). This evocation gives the ornaments their own kind of power within the dark home; perhaps they are only reflecting candlelight, but the amount of light they are able to fill a home with, during a time when candles were the only source of light during the long winter nights, is substantial, as if fairies had dusted the room with a mystical light.[14] The ornaments empowering a brighter light allow for the people within the home to see one another longer and thus connect more deeply. Dickens even refers to the enchantment and the "fairy light" that come from these otherwise "common" items (293). Like this enchanted light, there is also the magic bell in "A Christmas Tree." This bell plays music "which still sounds in [his] ears unlike all other bells—and music plays" (294).[15] Dickens does not ignore the darker magic of the wintertime; he notes that celebrators must turn to face "the City of the Dead" and welcome "from its silent hosts" passed loved ones returning (*Older* 303). Dickens does not want his readers only to evoke the brighter,

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[14] Gerry Bowler in his *The World Encyclopedia of Christmas* explains the origins of Christmas trees and lights on the tree. He explores both the pagan and Christian origins of these traditions. He writes, "Christian legend-makers... [attributed] the origins of the tree to a dramatic encounter between the missionary St. Boniface and German pagans in the 720s. After chopping down the Oak of Thor at Geismar, Boniface is said to have pointed to a young fir tree as the new symbol to which the German people should look, ever green even in the midst of winter darkness" (226). He also notes that Martin Luther was the first person to attach candles to a Christmas tree in an attempt to emulate "heavens above Bethlehem on the night of Nativity" (132).

[15] This imagery is not unlike that in a much later fiction *The Polar Express* (1985), in which Santa bestows a magic bell to a little boy that can be heard only by true believers; the connection between Dickens and Chris Van Allsburg's picture book is that this magic bell is unlike anything else the listener has ever heard. The magic of the bell itself is its effect on the reader, and the bell's ability to act as a physical symbol of the magic of the season.

joyous, childlike, wondrous magic of the holiday; they must allow passed beloveds back into their home as ghosts and guides. The magic that they bring with them is to be just as valued as the crafted warmth of the time. Dickens recognizes the important association, or connections, among winter, spirits, and magic; these elements constitute the Christmas holiday.

As Dickens reminds readers to create beautiful childhoods for their children full of magic and connections to those passed, he does not ignore the plight of those without families to return to; he urges his readers to open their homes to the less fortunate and to turn away *Nothing*. Dickens retains the physical aspects of his metaphorical Christmas Tree in "A Christmas Tree;" he notes that the evergreen will cast "no gloomy shadow" (300). Here, Dickens's metaphor of shadow and light ensures that, within the world of Christmas and its wonder, nothing will remain obscured, and all peoples are protected from the negative, harsher aspects of the world like hunger or the cold. As in *A Christmas Carol*, Dickens explores both the intimate and general applications of Christmas ideals (Chitwood 68). He even references giving all welcome shelter by the Christmas hearth and underneath the holly in "As We Grow Older" (302). Sheltering those less fortunate within a warm home filled with the magic items of Christmas illustrates this holiday as intentionally creating space for the less fortunate.[16] An interesting choice of Dickens is to capitalize *Nothing* in the sentence: "'On Christmas Day, we will shut out from our fireside, Nothing'" (303). *Nothing* can have multiple readings, whether it is the people who may have less and struggle or the emotions we'd rather suppress. Christmas Day is a time where celebrants should protect themselves from the dark world, but also be open, receptive. This juxtaposition allows for imperfections in the holiday. Dickens recognizes that wrapping everything in a perfect

[16] Whether the fairies who found shelter under holly during the holiday or Past who carried a piece of it with him, the imagery of holly as a protective force has been established through Dickens works and folklore—not to be mistaken with mistletoe, which has an inverse meaning deriving from the Norse thought-world.

protective ring may not last forever, so he confers upon Christmas the power to shelter all peoples and emotions.

Dickens attempts to create a Christmas that is accessible to all participants and instructs his readers in the best practices come December. Transforming the teachings of his fictional work into personal essays allows the prose to come closer to his audience's reality. As Chitwood notes, "Scrooge will become practically synonymous with Christmas itself" (72), but it is the personal essays of Dickens that realign the fictional journey Scrooge undergoes to the real world in which Dickens lived. Dickens seeks to protect the ideal, magical, warm Christmas, but does not ignore the imperfect, ghostly, gloomy Winter realities. His unification of these opposites allows for a more human-centered holiday rather than a day focused on the church and its lessons; Dickens advocates for a child-centric holiday that is rooted in the home. Dickens ends these two stories with rather different imagery, but both beautifully evocative; "A Christmas Tree" closes with Dickens observing boys and girls dancing and playing upon the branches of the Christmas Tree that represent his life, and "As We Grow Older" ends with the image of a winter sun setting and the sparkles of light from homes appearing out of the dark night. Both images speak to a sense of continuation and the magic of light/life everlasting, the power of rituals and community enduring.

A Life of Christmas Generosity Returned

George Bailey was prayed for to begin with. The classic film *It's a Wonderful Life* (1947), directed by Frank Capra, descends from *A Christmas Carol*, and shares many of its ideals.[17] This film follows the life of George Bailey from boyhood to a leadership position in his

[17] In the 1820s, there was hardly any mention of Christmas in British and American newspapers (Nissenbaum 52), but today the holiday takes over all of popular media for the month of December. The industry of Christmas films in the 20th and 21st centuries in many ways mirrors the Christmas book market of Dickens' time. Families would read

community. Throughout the film, George exemplifies the giving spirit of Christmas, despite only a fourth of the film taking place during the holiday season. Christmas as a symbol for familial and communal unity dominates the culminating scenes, but the ideals of Christmas appear throughout the film. Christmas films have become a major aspect of the holiday season in our modern era; however, the foundations to popular cultures' love of holiday films began almost a hundred years ago. Mark Cohen in his article for the *Psychoanalysis, Culture, & Society Journal* argues that *Wonderful* enjoys the same popularity as many movies based on *Carol* because of their shared themes (393). As Ebenezer Scrooge declares that he will keep Christmas in his heart all year long, George Bailey demonstrates the good that comes from such a mindset. Christopher Garbowski, Associate Professor at the Institute of English at Maria Curie-Sklodowska University in Poland, explores the religious, specifically Catholic, imagery in this film to provide a broader examination of the dominant cultural code of the society in which George lives and why he may feel this *need* to give (35). Through his dedication to his community, George sacrifices many of his own dreams, and by the climax of the film, George believes his life to have been meaningless. However, the community that he has built returns his goodwill with no expectation of repayment. This movie is more than from simply a tale of one man's life: it narrates the greater human need for community and generosity exemplified during Christmastime.

Capra establishes George as someone who will accept even physical harm to protect those in his community from a young age. There are many moments when Capra illustrates selflessness such as when George saves his younger brother Harry from a frozen lake and loses hearing in one ear; however, it is his relationship with Mr. Gower that best exemplifies George's willingness to put even his body on the line for those in his community. As a schoolboy, George

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these tales together, and now, they gather around the television to watch a favorite film. Christmas retains an enduring narrative appeal to both writers and filmmakers.

works for Mr. Gower, the town pharmacist, and one day, saves Mr. Gower from ruin. Mr. Gower instructs George to bring a case of pills to a little boy who is sick at home; however, George notices that Mr. Gower accidentally fills the pills with a poison. Upon hearing that the pills were never delivered, Mr. Gower berates George, smacking his ear until it bleeds. George cries out, "You're hurting my sore ear" (00:10:55). George protects a person within his community and accepts the pain and anguish in their stead. Cohen notes that George has a "[m]asochistic submission to the wishes of others" (396); despite his in intense language, Cohen is highlighting an important aspect of George's flaw. It is as if George values himself less than those around him; this is not the lesson Christmas, nor the film, attempts to leave viewers with by the end, however, George demonstrates powerful empathy as he soothes an adult: "It wasn't your fault, Mr. Gower… I know you feel bad" (00:11:00). Even at such a young age, George is attuned to those around him and their needs; he exhibits the ideals of Christmas because George embodies generosity and care. Despite Mr. Gower's abuse, George promises without prompting that he will never tell anyone about Mr. Gower's mistake. Establishing his selflessness from a young age helps explain why, as George grows older, he continues to prioritize helping those in need, often sacrificing parts of himself.

Capra uses the moments of great joy in George's life to demonstrate his self-sacrificing nature and how his community responds to his generosity. About halfway through the film, George Bailey and his new wife are poised to set off with $2000 for their honeymoon; however, a financial crash in Bedford Falls disrupts their plans. Every person within the community wants to liquidate their funds from the Bailey bank, which would allow the villain of the film, Mr. Potter, to have total control over the town's banking system. As George stands in his office, he looks at a portrait of his father on the wall with the caption written below: "All you can take with

you is that which you've given away" (00:54:49). Cohen notes that George has looked up to his father and his philanthropic purpose all his life (394). Within an instant and with his father's lesson in his heart,[18] George Bailey returns to his customers and convinces them to stay with the bank by giving away his own honeymoon funds. Some eagerly take the money, but most mutter pleas of, "But it's your own money, George," met by George's simple words, "Never mind about that. How much do you want?" (00:58:20). George Bailey is demonstrating yet again the ability to give without an expectation of return; he notes these are loans and his customers' accounts remain open, but he encourages them to "Pay it when you can" (00:58:30). The Christmas spirit shines through in this moment as George puts not only his body but his capital on the line, demonstrating a modern sacrifice that has come to mean almost as much as physical sacrifice. The spirit of generosity sustains George into his adulthood.

Knowing George as a selfless man, the angel Clarence utilizes this trait to save George from himself, emphasizing George's prioritization of others over his own desires. Towards the end of the film, George believes he has lost all of his clients' money and spirals into depression. The snow in Bedford Falls falls heavier and heavier, as if the world is crashing down on him. George stands on the edge of a bridge overlooking rough, cold water, but just before he can commit suicide, Clarence jumps into the water. George abandons his plans to save Clarence from drowning. This moment is a "eucatastrophe" or a good catastrophe as Garbowski terms it (37). George again gives up his own desire for someone else, demonstrating his self-sacrificial nature. However, here this quality saved him from making an irrevocable decision.[19] As they warm up inside, Clarence notes philosophically, "I had to act quickly. That's why I jumped in. I knew if I

[18] Dickens acts as the voice in Capra's ear teaching him the lessons of Christmas.
[19] Here is another moment of *magic* as George stands at the threshold between life and death; through Clarence's angelic abilities, George gets a second chance, transforming both who he is and who he will become.

were drowning you would try to save me, ya see you did. That's how I saved you" (01:40:47). Clarence, having watched George's whole life, knows that George will forgo his own wants to help someone in need, so Clarence makes it appear that George is the one saving him. Clarence in many ways references Dickens' Ghosts as they too are spiritual, powerful figures that appear to help the suffering protagonist through a magical journey. Both Dickens' Ghosts and Capra's Clarence are attuned to their protagonists' past, present, and future; Clarence fulfills in many ways the functions of all three Ghosts' journeys in one. Clarence's appearance is also a response to George's friends' and family's prayers (Garbowski 39); the film opens with the voices of Bedford Falls asking for protection and help for George. This opening establishes that from the beginning George has had the help and support of every person in Bedford Falls. George's suicidal thoughts are prompted not by a desire to die, but instead a fear of disappointing so many whom he has helped in the past.

Clarence's strategy to help George is rooted in the understanding that George may not know how to accept help. Clarence is a clever angel and asks George for help gaining his wings; of course, George agrees but asks "How?" and Clarence provides George an answer hard for him to hear: "By letting me help you" (01:42:40). Unlike Scrooge, George is comfortable being the caretaker and person to sacrifice, but George must learn that allowing others to take care of him is important as well. As Cohen notes, audiences need to be able to identify themselves with George for the emotional impact of the film to work (398-399). This film is a lesson in both the valor and the dangers of self-sacrifice. Clarence eases George into wisdom by creating a mutually beneficial exchange. This exchange anticipates a more modern sense of Christmas with gifts exchanged between child and parent, friend and friend, sibling to sibling.

Capra utilizes the holiday season at the end of the film to bring all of George's community together in the Bailey home, emphasizing Christmas' ties to care and community. After George sees a world in which he never existed that lacks his protection and generosity, he realizes the impact his small but profound actions have had on Bedford Falls. Whether it be when Martini praises George Bailey for aiding him in owning his own home or Bert and Ernie singing in the rain to create a honeymoon for Mary and George, his community has shown George throughout his life what he means to them.[20] George has always been surrounded by a community of people who both appreciate the warmth and care he has brought into their lives and try to return the generosity. George Bailey's generosity is returned tenfold when people pour into his home around Christmas with baskets and arms full of money to save George Bailey from ruin. Mr. Gower and Martini both show up with money. Uncle Billy credits George's wife: "Mary did it. She told some people you were in trouble, and they scattered all over town collecting money. Didn't ask any questions. Just said, 'George is in trouble? Then count me in'" (02:05:33). And everyone is covered in snow, cold from the storm, but warm inside as they smile and wish one another and George Bailey a *Merry Christmas*. This scene encompasses what to Dickens Christmas is truly about: communities coming together despite the cold, dark outside to create warmth and bounty inside a home. George Bailey is surrounded by those he has helped his whole life and in turn is receiving the graciousness of humanity.

At the end of the film, Harry Bailey deems his brother "the richest man in town" (02:08:28). Despite financial troubles, no college degree, lack of 'worldliness,' or other arbitrary qualifications, George is rich in love and brotherhood. Cohen notes that the holiday season is a

[20] Cohen notes the connection between George's compassion for his community and that of the Roman festival Saturnalia: "As with the charitable responses just described, there is evidence… to indicate that in the Roman festival of Saturnalia, a precursor of our modern Christmas, awareness of and partial alternation of social differences for a temporary period formed part of the festivities" (399).

moment of respite from the demands of life (401), and *It's a Wonderful Life* teaches audiences that the lessons of the holiday need to be maintained throughout the year. George Bailey only receives as much as he gives. Garbowski notes that this is a film on the side of hope (44), an emotion that extends past George's own life and to the film's audience. Clarence gifts George a book at the end of film and writes inside, "[n]o man is a failure who has friends" (02:08:48), and as George Bailey looks around at the people he has inspired and uplifted, there can be no doubt in his mind that this Christmas miracle comes from him.

Santa Claus' Magical Connection to Our Child-Selves

Santa Claus is almost synonymous with Christmas; he has become *the* symbol for the child-centric Christmas of today. His appearance in film and literature is always coupled with the magic of gift-giving, reminding audiences of the important focus on children and their curiosity during the Christmas season. Santa Claus has appeared in the canon of Christmas literature for a long time now; *Miracle on 34th Street* (1947)[21] is a story that examines the nature of belief in children and the importance of retaining a childlike spirit. Santa is a central figure in this tale and stands trial for his existence. The motif of Santa remains important to our modern era. In *Coyote Christmas: A Lakota Story*, Coyote, the trickster of many Native American thought worlds,[22] transforms himself into Santa Claus to co-opt Christmas dinner. This story of magical transformation provides a lens into the ways Christmas and its focus on children have traversed culture boundaries.[23] SD Nelson reconstructs the Santa of popular culture into a story that his

[21] *Miracle* and *Wonderful* both debuted in this year and examined both similar and separate aspects of the Christmas holiday. While *Wonderful* focused on generosity and fellowship of man, *Miracle* emphasized the importance of belief and childlike wisdom.

[22] I have chosen to refer to the belief system of Indigenous peoples as "thought-worlds" because many tribes view their practices as not beliefs but gifts from their spiritual guides. Additionally, in the study of other older forms of religions such as the Norse Viking beliefs, they are referred to as "thought-worlds."

[23] It is important to note that the Christianization of Indigenous peoples was not often a peaceful or non-violent process. Many Native Americans suffered at the hands of those who celebrated Christmas; however, it is also important to note that many Indigenous peoples continue to align with Christianity and adopt its holiday practices.

Lakota community will recognize and, being a picture book, focuses on how the youth of this community encounter the Santa figure. As a symbol of the child-centric aspects and popular culture, Santa allows for the exploration of many aspects of Christmas. Children are taught what Christmas means and how to celebrate it through stories like these, and thus an examination of this Lakota story alongside *Miracle* provides a glimpse into how the ideals of Christmas are taught to the younger generations and carried to the next.

In *Miracle on 34th Street*,[24] the audience meets a little girl who is much too intellectually mature for her age but, through her relationship with Kris Kringle, learns how to be imaginative. Susan is a realistic child and doesn't believe in Santa Claus; she declares this because her mother has told her so. She does not hear lullabies as she falls asleep or often play with those her own age. However, when the man claiming to be the real Santa Claus enters her life, she is confronted with an older gentleman who encourages her to be imaginative and believe in magic. One day, as Kris greets children coming to visit Santa Claus at Macy's, Susie watches. A Dutch girl enters with her adopted mother and can't speak any English. In an instant, Kris begins speaking Dutch with the little girl who calls him *Sinterklaas* (00:22:39). At this moment Susie sees for the first time the magic that Kris possesses. He is able to speak Dutch fluently and make a young child feel seen and understood.[25] Susie sees how powerful a belief in Santa can be and the joy it brings a child. From this moment forward, Susie wonders about the possibility of Kris being Santa Claus and thus becomes receptive to Christmas magic and the light it can bring into one's life.

This is a complicated history, but *Coyote Christmas* demonstrates the beautiful ways in which Native peoples have fused their spirit practices with American pop culture.

[24] Interestingly, the film is translated into *Das Wunder von Manhattan* in the German version, meaning "The Wonder from Manhattan," signaling wonder, magic, and belief in this film (Hnilica 77).

[25] In the 1994 version of *Miracle*, instead of Dutch, Santa Claus connects with a deaf girl through American Sign Language, emphasizing how in different times, the impact of what language is used changes.

Kris and Susie build a strong relationship, and although those around him challenge his reality, Kris remains focused on helping Susie be a child. One evening, Susie and Kris discuss *imagination*. Susie mentions how silly other children can be when pretending to be animals, but also insinuates how lonely she can feel at times. Kris encourages her: "Now, you've heard of the French nation, the British nation. Well, this is the imagination. It's a wonderful place. How'd you like to be able to make snowballs in the summertime?" (00:39:05). With this comment, Kris and Susie begin a lesson in how to pretend to be a monkey; they scratch their heads and make goofy noises and faces in the mirror. Kris reawakens the child within Susie and gives her a space that is safe for her to do so and eventually to find a new community with other children. Irmtraud Hnilica, Professor of New Literature at Fernuniversität in Hagen, notes in her book *Weihnacthsfilme lesen: Familienordungen, Geschlechternormen und Liebeskonzepte im Genre* that Susie asking Kris for something for Christmas also indicates her growing belief in him and thus her rediscovered child-self (79). Earlier in the film, Kris explains that "Christmas isn't just a day. It's a frame of mind" (00:30:05), and in this scene the audience can see the truth in this statement. Monkeys and playing pretend have nothing to do with Christmas, but they demonstrate how Christmas teaches us to focus on the joy of every child within ourselves and how that joy can connect us all. Susie begins to learn how to be a child from Santa Claus and through her belief in Santa Claus.

The magic of and belief in Santa Claus allow even those most logical to connect to their inner child and one another. Kris' legitimacy is called into question when he goes on trial to determine whether he is truly Santa Claus, and this culminating scene teaches the adults in *Miracle*'s world the importance of belief and honoring childhood. Many people suspect Kris is delusional: "Maybe he's only a little crazy, like painters or composers or some of those men in

Washington" (00:28:56); "His is a delusion for good. He only wants to be friendly and helpful" (00:34:38). However, the children who visit him and see him believe that he truly is Santa Claus. During Kris' trial, Mr. Gailey brings out the son of the prosecution lawyer, who declares that he believes in Santa because his father told him so. Gailey uses the children's belief in Santa to demonstrate his reality. And finally, Gailey has Kris acquitted when truckloads of children's letters get delivered to the courthouse from the post office because they, too, believe Kris is Santa Claus. Children's belief and imagination is what saves Santa Claus. Hnilica notes that the belief in Santa helps Kris become acquitted in his trial (82). Whether Kris' magic is real or not, the desire for a figure like Santa Claus creates his magic and allows him to be real. In the final scene of the movie, Susie runs through a house that she believes Kris has found for her. As Susie runs out to the backyard, her mother and Mr. Gailey find in a small corner the cane that Kris always carries with him. In this moment the two adults believe in Santa Claus, once again reawakening their own childlike spirits. Believing in the magic of Christmas gives both Susie and her parental figures new access to their inner spirit and their connections to one another.[26]

While *Miracle* showcases how Santa Claus and Christmas give celebrants a moment to reflect on their own childhoods, *Coyote Christmas* demonstrates how celebrants may fuse their cultural traditions with Christmas motifs and still embrace the holiday ideals. *Coyote* teaches readers there are multiple ways to celebrate Christmas, yet the magic of Christmas remains true in them all. In this tale, SD Nelson fuses the Trickster figure from Native American traditions with Santa Claus, the image of generosity. Coyote, as explained by Nelson in his Author's Note, is a character who will do anything for a meal; in this fusion tale, Coyote enters the home of a

[26] Not only does this movie explore the importance of childhood and imagination, but it also reinforces the home and family as fundamental aspects of the Christmas tradition. Irmtraud Hnilica explores this association in her book *Weihnacthsfilme lesen: Familienordungen, Geschlechternormen und Liebeskonzepte im Genre*.

Lakota family on Christmas Eve dressed as Santa Claus. Comparatively, Kris in *Miracle* is welcomed into the home portraying himself as the real Santa. Whether Kris is Santa or not, his intentions behind becoming the Santa Claus figure appear to be purer than those of his Coyote counterpart. Before his welcome into the home, Coyote watches the family from the outside with "Sister Raven." They note "a juniper tree sparkling with lights, which appeared to be growing inside the house," and that a boy and girl sang a song about a reindeer with a red nose.[27] The family has decorated a tree and are spending time together inside the warm home; Christmas has given them the opportunity to unite. Nelson's examination of Coyote's confusion around these traditions demonstrates that he is separate from the Christmas ritual, but he also emphasizes that Coyote has heard of Christmas. Nelson has provided a moment of epochal harmony and interaction. Coyote is able to identify the holiday and how it may service his own desires because his episteme and the Christmas tradition have begun to overlap.

Coyote wanders into the barn in search of a disguise and uses his magic of transfiguration for his own gain. The barn is full of animals, and most of them are quiet as Coyote enters the space, but the cows in their fear continue to *moo.* Irritated, Coyote uses his power to transform one of the cows into an owl: "'Moo Cow, Moo Cow, moo no more. An owl you will be–fly out the door.'" The cow is suddenly a bird let loose into the night. Coyote, not thinking twice about this spell, instead uses his magic to aid his personal quest.[28] He soon finds a red rag that he transforms into a full Santa suit and sheep's wool for a beard. As Coyote leaves the barn, he

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[27] Music is a major aspect of the Christmas holiday. From "*Stille Nacht*" to "Rudolf the Red Nose Reindeer," the auditory experience of Christmas has been important to the holiday for centuries.

[28] Lance Henson, Cheyenne poet and activist, shared with me a story of his Grandmother, Rena Minimic (Tobacco) Cook. Rena was born into the beadworkers, the sacred female clan of his tribe, whose knowledge is not shared with the men in his tribe. He was told as a child that, when his Grandmother prayed deep into the night, her medicine would shapeshift into *ohkom* or coyote. She would shapeshift into the protector of these animals and run with them. Despite being from a different tribe, Henson's story emphasizes that all aspects of nature are needed, even the trickster, just as Christmas retains both bright and dark elements of the human condition.

reappears in the snowy night transformed into a "fake Santa." Coyote has shapeshifted a bird and rag magically, as well as himself. The Trickster has found a way to use the Christmas holiday to his own advantage.

The time within the home forces Coyote to feel compassion and witness an unprecedented transformation. As the little girl welcomes Coyote into the home, the Trickster says, "You certainly have the Christmas spirit." That the family does. They welcome "Santa" into their warm, bright home on a cold winter night; Grandmother insists that "'[a] hungry stranger is always welcome at our table.'" This family may not have much to share, but they welcome Coyote for a feast of spaghetti and meatballs with pumpkin pie for dessert. This family echoes all Dickens' lessons of generosity, light, abundance, care, and community. This family is not without their hardships; Davy, the little boy, is in a wheelchair that Coyote mistakes for a toy. For a moment, Coyote feels a pang of sympathy. This scene does the same for Coyote as Scrooge's time with Tiny Tim does for him in *A Christmas Carol*; both figures struggle with acknowledging the plights of those around them, but when confronted with a disabled child, they must for a moment reflect on their own behavior. Although burdened with this new consciousness, Coyote still maintains his self-preserving nature. Coyote rushes to leave as dinner concludes and trips over his sack of straw masquerading as gifts, but to his surprise, real presents come tumbling out. Sister Raven, who has been watching from the window, is playing her own magical trick of transformation on the Trickster himself. Each member of this Lakota family receives a box with a perfect present inside, except Davy—his is empty. The Coyote runs out the door, injuring himself on the way, and as he looks back to call out a final "Ho-Ho-Ow," he sees Davy standing outside the home walking.[29] Coyote has witnessed his own Christmas miracle.

[29] This moment of healing echoes those of Christ's life.

Whether due to Raven or Coyote's magic, Coyote has taken on a leg injury himself and Davy is blessed with the ability to walk. Coyote has become Santa Claus performing miracles for this one family.

Postscript

So, dear reader, as Dickens or Hoffmann may advise you, walk with these figures and principles all your life; see yourself hand in hand with Santa Claus and the Coyote, Scrooge and his Ghosts, Maria and her Nutcracker. Maybe carrying a lit candle or a sprig of holly. For it is their lessons that have brought light into the darkness, but it is your actions that guarantee that flame is never extinguished.

Afterword

I recently attended a poetry reading by two Indigenous poets, Joe Bruchac and Lance Henson. They shared their writings with a rapt audience of majority white Americans with a few people of color. We all listened attentively as Joe walked us through some of his humorous poetry. He had a sweet smile, and lines crinkled next to his eyes as he said the punchline to many of his jokes. I sat in awe of this older gentleman's ability to change his voice as he began a poem; his poetry assumed power in his throat and sounded as if a spirit of a much younger man spoke through him. As Joe finished his selection, he dedicated two final poems, written only in the days before, to his friend, Lance. Thunderous applause erupted as Joe finished his poem "The Feather," a story about visiting an imprisoned Indigenous man and giving him hope again. As Joe sat down, Lance stood up.

He was shorter than I expected. His knees leaned outward, and he walked slowly. Joe noted to the crowd, "He's just had knee surgery a couple days ago; give him time to walk to the podium." Little did I know that I would have waited all day, if it meant I could hear one particular poem. Lance's poetry was rich with imagery and often short in form; his poems handled difficult topics and were rich with references to Lance's travels. Having lived abroad in place like Italy and Switzerland, visited such places as Africa and Malaysia, fought in the Vietnam War, this man had many cultures and stories to share.

Lance began to read from his unpublished manuscript, recently translated in Italy. These pieces caught my ear; we were in the mind of the poet. These finished and yet not available poems swarmed the room. Then Lance said, "this next poem is inspired by a visit I took with my wife to a Christmas market." I sat up in my seat; was this going to be the poem I included in my own writings? What part of Christmas does this unique poet love the most? Is it the light? Is it

the tree? Or what about transformation? Will he mention Coyote as S.D. Nelson did? No. Lance told a story about a small wooden cross he saw with *Palestine* carved into it. Lance noted that the vendor refused to take any money for this cross. Lance then retold the story of Indigenous peoples being removed from their land forcibly, their blood spilled in the snow, and a banner reading "Peace on Earth and Good Will Towards Man" hanging above them.

I sat quiet. I know the history of Christmas, but confronting another person's own interpretation of Christmas was eye-opening. This holiday, filled with so many beautiful lessons and morals, also contains brutal histories. This reality, this dichotomy cannot be ignored. As I kept listening, Lance shared with us that in his language there is no word for *dark*, only *shadow*. Within the Cheyenne culture, it is thought that all ancestors live in the shadows; there is no past history or future history–only now. Lance stated very simply, "because you saw them, they are watching you." I understood at this moment the similarities in Lance's worldview and my own. We may have different words and holidays, but our humanity as people in a world full of darkness mirrors one another. We have the same understanding and hopes for the world's people. My Christmas is not his; my Christmas is not that of the Christians, but what my Christmas means to me—generosity, connection, compassion, light, warmth, respite, protection—aligns with the needs of all humans, celebrants or not.

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