

Signaling the Intersection of Two Worlds and Dual Narrative Progression: The Functions of Chimes in *A Christmas Carol*

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Abstract: This paper attempts to explore the functions of chimes in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, with Shen's theory of dual narrative progression. It offers a close reading of the novella and discovers that at the level of plot development, the chimes signaled the emergence of spirits and the intersection of two worlds. In the meantime, they cater to identifying the covert progression of this novella. While reading other similar works, we may be inspired by the functions of chimes as signals.

Keywords: Chimes; Signals; Two worlds; Dual narrative progression; A Christmas Carol

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1. Introduction

Historically, Dickens's novels have attracted more attention from researchers than his novellas, which also embody the creative thoughts and aesthetic features of Dickens and thus are literarily study-worthy as well. Among his novellas, *A Christmas Carol* written in 1843, which transformed the significance and value of modern Christmas Day in the West, is an endearing and monumental masterpiece about Christmas ^[1]. The chimes found throughout the text are material elements. Accompanied by the chimes, there are marvelous scenes with the covert progression bubbling up ^[2].

2. Intersection of two worlds

When the first chime struck, the curtains of Scrooge's bed were drawn aside by the first spirit, an unearthly visitor, which he found himself in the face of. Obviously, it was a moment when the two worlds met – the earthly world Scrooge lived in and the unearthly world the spirit came from. Immediately after that, the narrator explained that Scrooge was “as close to it as I am now to you, and I am standing in the spirit at your elbow ^[3].” This was also a meeting of two worlds in a different sense, since “I” here refers to the narrator of this novella in the literary world, and “you” refers to the readers in the real world. Hence, at the stroke of one, the distance between the spirit and Scrooge was, so to speak, the distance between the reader and the book being read.

After the first spirit had left, the second appeared in a slightly different way. As the bell tolled one again (the ghost of Marley told Scrooge the first spirit would visit the following day when the chime struck one, and the second would visit on the next night at the same hour, followed by the third when the last stroke of twelve ceased), nothing happened before Scrooge's eyes, but in effect, the earthly and unearthly worlds were already connected; only this time, it was in the next room. Besides, all this was accompanied

by “a blaze of ruddy light ^[3],” according to which Scrooge spotted the second spirit whose “life upon this globe ^[3]” was quite brief.

In less than a day, the second spirit’s life on earth ended with the chimes striking twelve midnight, and then came the third spirit. Despite the fact that there did not appear to be two worlds, it is deducible that two worlds did exist here through the lens of Scrooge. As the chimes ceased, Scrooge “looked about him ^[3]” for the second spirit in vain, and when “lifting up his eyes ^[3],” he saw the third approaching him. From looking around, Scrooge had a two-dimensional vision, but when he looked up, a vertical dimension came into existence, which led to a transition from a two-dimensional space to a three-dimensional one. It thus follows that when Scrooge “looked about him ^[3],” there was only one world, but once he lifted his eyes, he saw another to some extent.

Experiencing the visits of the three spirits, Scrooge rejoiced to turn over a new leaf and was shot through with “good intentions ^[3],” as if he had thoroughly remolded himself. When the chime – “the lustiest peals ^[3]” this time – struck again, Scrooge ran to the window and opened it, finding a “clear, bright, jovial, stirring ^[3]” world outside, in contrast to the one in “fog and mist ^[3]” before. Also, it was definitely a new world for Scrooge because he had been confined in a dark, narrow, and closed world of his own for a long time, and after the sacred visits, he opened the “window” of his mind to welcome a fresh and beautiful world.

To make a brief summary, in each of the four scenes of *A Christmas Carol* mentioned above, two worlds intersected when the chimes struck. In fact, this phenomenon is not unique to this novella. In another work written by Dickens in 1844, *The Chimes*, the chimes in it worked that way as well.

In *The Chimes*, Toby Veck is a ticket-porter who had a terrifying dream. In the dream, guided by “the Spirit of the Chimes ^[4],” he witnessed the tragic lives of his loved ones in the future. Hearing the ringing of the chime, which “broke the spell that bound him ^[4],” he woke from the dream with the recognition of the hypocrisy of the rich and began to look ahead with hope and faith. Toby’s miserable dream before the chime could be considered a world, albeit a surreal one, but after the chime, he returned to the world where he lived with his daughter, Meg. In that way, the chime here, like the ones in *A Christmas Carol*, is also a signal of the intersection, or say, the intermediary of two worlds.

Owing an inspirational debt to the function of chimes in those two novellas, a Chinese web series called *Tientsin Mystic* (“河神”) is reminded of. This web series was adapted from a novel written by Zhang Muye, who goes by the pen name Tian Xia Ba Chang. Tian Xia Ba Chang (“天下霸唱”) also wrote other novels, such as *Candle in the Tomb* (“鬼吹灯”), which is quite popular in China, especially in recent years. Time Magazine mentioned that the most impressive thing about *Candle in the Tomb* is its bountiful imagination. Likewise, *Tientsin Mystic* narrates about the exploration of Guo Deyou and his friends. During the period of the Republic of China, Tientsin frequently suffered from flood, and strange events occurred in the river; in order to prevent the restoration of the “Mogu” organization (“魔古道”), Guo Deyou and his friends were involved in a slew of bizarre cases.

In the novel, the protagonist Guo Deyou has a psychic skill that no one else is equipped with. He is able to enter into his own world of consciousness through smoke, so as to solve cases (“点烟辩冤”) ^[5], and sometimes Yin and Yang also appear in his own world to solve mysteries, ergo the smoke signals the intersection of the world where Guo lives and his world of consciousness. The smoke is to Guo what the chime is to Scrooge.

In regard to the examples above, we may find that the chimes in *A Christmas Carol* and *The Chimes*, the smoke in *Tientsin Mystic*, and thus forth deem a transitional boundary state on an axis whose opposite extremes signify the rational system of nature and the irrational order of marvels from Todorov’s point of view ^[6]. They all have a common characteristic, in which they are usually formless and ethereal. In a nutshell, this sort of formless and ethereal signals is thought of as foreshadowing the intersection of two

worlds, but it leaves the readers with the question of whether that characteristic is essential to signal the intersection.

3. Emergence of covert progression

Two worlds may imply the duality of things. Close to the parts where the chimes in *A Christmas Carol* signal the intersection of two worlds in the plot development, it is discovered that the chimes play another important role, which has much to do with the dual narrative progression embedded in the novella (based on the references, it is clear that the sections demonstrating the two functions are not far apart; for example, the appearance of the first spirit was inscribed in page 22 of the book, and the early phase of the covert progression could be deduced from the same page).

Dual narrative progression is composed of plot development and covert narrative progression, which is an undercurrent throughout the text, paralleling with plot development and setting each other off. The relationship between the two boils down to complementation and subversion. The identification and grasp of covert progression are crucial. Professor Shen contends that some critics are likely to stretch the meaning of relevant texts pertaining to covert progression in the plot development, resulting in implausible interpretations and contentious criticism^[7].

Therefore, clarifying the plot development of *A Christmas Carol* is pretty much what is utmost needed. On the whole, it recounts the story of Ebenezer Scrooge, a miser who was haunted by the ghost of his former business partner, Jacob Marley, and the Ghost of Christmas Past, the Ghost of Christmas Present, as well as the Ghost of Christmas Yet-to-Come. After their visits, Scrooge was transformed from a selfish and grim man into a kinder and gentler one. This novella calls for the restoration of goodness, mercy, compassion, and love, all of which depict the true meaning of Christmas.

In order to understand covert progression, Shen, in her book, offers several guidelines that are conducive to better identifying and understanding covert progression in works: (1) pay heed to textual details that are trivial and irrelevant to the plot development^[8]; (2) inspect how those pieces of text act in cooperation; (3) lay emphasis on the investigation of intertextuality and similarity^[9].

A “trivial” finding has been discovered after a close reading. In the first stave, when Scrooge learned that the three spirits would visit him over the following three days, he obnoxiously joked, “Couldn’t I take ‘em all at once?^[3]” Before the chime struck, Scrooge had wondered if the visit from Marley’s ghost had been a dream; he had not put much faith in Marley’s message that one of the three spirits would visit him at one o’clock. When the chime struck four quarters of an hour yet before the stroke of one (some chimes in churches during the 19th or 20th century struck four times before striking the hour, and each stroke meant a quarter), Scrooge concluded “triumphantly^[2]” that all this was nothing but a “humbug^[3].” Nonetheless, he spoke too soon, and the “melancholy^[3]” hour bell rang with the appearance of the first spirit. Considering Scrooge’s eagerness to believe Marley’s ghost as well as his conceit of proclaiming triumph over the message, it can be inferred that he was contemptuous of ghost and lacked reverence for spirits. Consequently, the “melancholy^[3]” bell declared his defeat.

Covert progression, as Shen had elaborated, is a narrative undercurrent, running along another theme track independently behind the plot development, which largely relies on the concealed interaction of textual elements in different places^[9]. Scrooge’s transitory “triumph” and the “melancholy” bell mentioned above have little to do with what the plot development attempts to express, whereas when linked to certain pieces of text in what follows, they can be considered a prelude of the covert progression.

The sequence that treads on the heels of the prelude falls on the part when the chimes rang three quarters past eleven, when the second spirit was about to disappear. Scrooge “noticed^[3]” that the second spirit was ageing and thus inquired about it; he “cried^[3]” in alarm when he learned that the spirit’s life would end tonight. Compared with the previous situation where he had showed little reverence and dared to “wrestled

^[3]” with the first spirit, Scrooge here had growing concern about the state and life of the spirit.

Fifteen minutes later, at the stroke of twelve, Scrooge “bent down upon his knee ^[3],” facing the third spirit moving towards him as he was humbled by the solemnness and mystery surrounding it. Reperceiving this action and comparing it to another performed by Scrooge as he recognized his own grave – “cried, upon his knees ^[3],” we approach the next stage of covert progression: British people bend down on/upon one’s knee as a sign of respect toward the holy and honorable, but falling down on one’s knees could mean shame, commonly seen as a religious act by Christians who pray or confess to statues and relics or sinners who repent ^[10]. Therefore, Scrooge here was seen more respectful of the spirits while also being more penitent and devout than he was in what follows would be kneeling to the third Spirit or death.

In the last stave, Scrooge excitedly readied himself for Christmas and started life anew after being haunted by the three spirits. Hearing the engaging chimes, he repeated “Glorious, glorious! ^[3],” which reflected not only his direct compliment to the chimes, but also his sincere expression of worship to God.

Hereto, the relevant idea of covert progression has been explored by and large, with chimes as clues. Different from what the plot development aims to elucidate, covert progression deals with Scrooge being in growing awe of the Spirits and Christmas. In other words, as the three spirits walked him through various scenes, he became increasingly convinced of what they showed him and venerated them with Christmas and God in mind. Contemplating forging a bond between plot development and covert progression, it can be deduced that one’s process of becoming good and merciful resides with a growth of belief in and reverence for God, similar to the idea proposed by Zhao that transformation is the sequel of being situated in a strong religious atmosphere ^[11]. In doing so, the author of the novella has reinforced people’s faith in Christianity ^[12].

The classification of the interaction between plot development and covert progression has already been mentioned above. Shen further divided the relationship of complementation into nine subcategories, among which there is one quite as consistent with what has been analyzed in this paper – the juxtaposition of criticism and affirmation: plot development exposes and criticizes a certain social evil, while covert progression affirms a certain virtue and praises it ^[13]. The plot development of *A Christmas Carol* castigates Scrooge’s indifference and selfishness, whereas its covert progression attaches great importance to standing in awe of God. Hence, it can be claimed that this type of juxtaposition, to a large extent, is exemplified in the dual narrative progression of the novella.

4. Application of signals

On the grounds of analysis, we thus far have arrived at the second function of chimes in *A Christmas Carol*; that is, covert progression signaling. Covert progression, as its name suggests, is not easy to identify, primarily due to different interpretation frameworks among readers ^[14]. In Shen’s words, it is because readers are constrained by classical narratology ^[15] and the traditional concepts of plot since Aristotle ^[16]. Thus, if readers are capable of picking up hints from elements like chimes, they are more likely to spot the covert progression concealed in a work, given that it has one.

A good example would be discovering that the two functions of chimes are both present in *The Chimes* while reading. In addition to their function as a signal of the intersection of two worlds, chimes also serve as a signal of covert progression, showing up at each crucial node. In Dickens’s novella, *The Chimes*, a phenomenon that occurs more than once in the text is when the chimes struck, a swarm of “phantoms, spirits, elfin creatures of Bell ^[4],” in which people’s hope, imagination and reminiscence were reflected, began to dance with joy, but when the chimes stopped, the swarm “died and melted into air ^[4].” This matter signifies that chimes greatly control people’s minds. In what follows, while the chimes were ringing, Toby said, “Bless their (the chimes) sturdy hearts ^[4].” From this, it can be concluded that God directly blesses the chimes, through which He indirectly blesses people as well. Therefore, along with those chimes, the covert

progression of *The Chimes* also exists to stand up for God, manifesting that God always bless people ^[20].

We may find great similarities between *A Christmas Carol* and *The Chimes* in terms of their plots and themes, as both of them are Dickens's novellas written for Christmas ^[17], and Dickens, as "the father of Christmas" ^[18] and a master of ghost stories, affectionately called them "Ghostly little books ^[19]" or "goblin stories ^[4]." As we read Dickens' or other writers' ghost stories and marvelous works, we should pay more attention to signals like chimes, so that we would be able to detect the transformation of different worlds, involving dreams, minds, visions, and so on, as well as identify covert progressions in works for more comprehensive understanding.

The emphasis on the two functions of chimes is central to this paper's argument, but the works in question are, after all, limited to ghost stories or marvelous works. Therefore, we will conclude with another two questions.

- (1) Do elements like chimes in other types of works also serve as signals of the intersection of worlds and the emergence of covert progression?
- (2) If the number of such works reaches an acceptable level, can we apply what we have found as a knack or a rule?

Disclosure statement

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