

Ignorance and Poverty in *The Chimes*

OMAE Akiyuki

Abstract

Charles Dickens (1812–70) was a writer who left behind numerous works representative of 19th-century English literature, shaping an entire era. When it comes to *Christmas Stories* (1850–67), *A Christmas Carol* (1843) is widely celebrated. However, *The Chimes* (1844), despite its initial sales, received a lower critical appraisal and has since fallen into relative obscurity, even among scholars. In 1842, Dickens became deeply engaged in efforts to support the impoverished, working energetically to improve the conditions of London's working-class population through charitable activities. These experiences informed *A Christmas Carol*, written the following year, which empathized with the plight of the poor and portrayed a protagonist's redemption through encounters with spirits. Similarly, *The Chimes*, published the year after *A Christmas Carol*, also incorporated themes of poverty, social inequality, and the neglectful treatment of the impoverished by public officials of the time. It is fair to consider this work as part of Dickens's broader critique of society that had taken shape since 1842.

Furthermore, given Dickens's active involvement in charitable work for the underprivileged, *The Chimes* can be seen as a response to contemporary critiques of figures like Thomas Malthus (1766–1834). *The Christmas Stories*, written during this period, clearly reflect Dickens's social criticism embedded within their narratives.

In this paper, I will focus on the social critique portrayed in *The Chimes*, particularly its emphasis on ignorance and poverty, as a part of Dickens's *Christmas Stories*.

【Keyword】 Dickens, social inequality, poverty, British society

I . Introduction

Charles Dickens (1812–70) was one of the most famous English writers of the 19th century. When it comes to his *Christmas Stories* (1850–67), *Christmas Carol* (1843) gets most of the votes, but *The Chimes* (1844) is a work that has not been read by many people, including scholars, because of its low reputation in spite of its sales on the day it was written. *The Chimes* is now not read by many people, including researchers.

Dickens had been active in helping the needy since 1842, when he was engaged in charitable work

to improve the conditions of the working class in London. *Carol*, written the following year, is a work that depicts the protagonist's penitence through the spirit, while including his experiences working for working-class charities and his feelings toward the poor. *The Chimes*, published the following year, is a novel that, like its predecessor, incorporates various elements such as poverty, social inequality, and the mistreatment of the poor by the government officials of the time. In other words, considering the social criticism Dickens began in 1842, this work can be considered as forming the viewpoint of Dickens' social criticism.

According to Robert Douglas Fairhurst, Dickens originally got the idea for *A Christmas Story* from the following events.

On 2 January 1840, Dickens wrote to his printers, Bradbury and Evans, to thank them for annual Christmas gift of a turkey. He chose his words with care:

Mr Dear Sirs,

I determined not to thank you for the Turkey until it was quite gone, in order that you might have a becoming idea of its astonishing capabilities. The last remnant of that blessed bird made its appearance at breakfast yesterday — I repeat it, yesterday portions having furnished forth seven grills, one boil, and a cold lunch or two...¹

At first glance, the letter reads like an ordinary thank-you letter, but the scene in which he is sent a turkey for Christmas and eats it with great care is reminiscent of the famous scene in *A Christmas Carol*. Dickens mistakenly bought a small turkey, and when he brought it home, he realized that the whole family could not eat the turkey, so he went back to the same store the next day and asked to exchange it for a larger turkey. The owner got the difference and exchanged it for a bigger turkey, and when Dickens went home and saw the faces of his children overjoyed and his wife cooking it in various ways, he realized that he could change people's minds so much with a single dish. Four years later, he published *A Christmas Carol*. He presented a story on the theme. The story was about the experience he had gained in his work of helping the needy since 1842, in which the poor, who were in daily need, were replaced on Christmas night by a positive feeling from a magical experience they had through a ghost. However, in *A Christmas Story*, Dickens also depicts the social criticisms of the poor and the desperate lives of the workers, which he learned through his work with the poor. In other words, if his previous work, *Oliver Twist* (1837), was a criticism of the poorhouse, *A Christmas Story* can be read as a novel of social criticism that vilifies Malthusian theory. In fact, the echoes of Malthusian theory were so great in the thinking of the people of the time that the Malthusian theory, which viewed mankind as essentially ruthless, was even taken up by Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), a literary scholar of the time, P. B. Shelly (1792-1822), S. Coleridge (1772-1834), Wadsworth (1770-1850), W. Hazlitt (1770-1830), and Disraeli (1804-81). In other words, Malthus's

¹ Robert Douglas Fairhurst, "Introduction," *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*. Oxford: Oxford Classics, 2006, p.1.

An Essay on the Principle of Population (1798) is always a subject of reference when considering the social criticism of his contemporaries, and it is almost impossible to consider the social criticism of the time without its existence.² In other words, *A Christmas Story* written by Dickens contains various socially critical elements, such as the poor, education, and ignorance of the time. Also, Claire Tomalin states the following.

Christmas Carol was Dicken's response to the condition of the working class in London, and his next Christmas book, *The Carlyle*, Engels, and Dickens were all fired with anger and horror at the indifference of the rich to the fate of the poor, who had almost no access to education, no care in sickness, saw their young children set to work for ruthless Factory-owners and could consider themselves lucky if they were only half starved.³

Considering the above, this essay will focus on Dickens' perspective of social criticism in *A Christmas Story*, especially on ignorance and poverty in *The Chime*.

II. Dickens' Thoughts on Christmas

Before we get into *The Chimes*, I would first like to look at *Sketches by Boz's* (1833), which he wrote in writing, focusing on what he saw and heard on the streets of London when he was a newspaper reporter. In the "Character" in Chapter 2, "Christmas Dinner" chapter in this book, Dickens says the following about Christmas.

Christmas time! That man must be a misanthrope indeed, in whose breast something like a jovial feeling is not roused - in whose mind some pleasant associations are not awakened - by the recurrence of Christmas..., Who can be insensible to the outpourings of good feeling, and the honest interchange of affectionate attachment, which abound at this season of the year? A Christmas family-party! We know nothing in nature more delightful! There seems a magic in the very name of Christmas. (emphasis mine)⁴

Dickens' last sentence, 'There seems a magic in the very name of Christmas,' seems to indicate that Christmas is a special day in Dickens' mind, a day that brings about all kinds of magic. The next chapter is about "New Year".

² When Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population* was published, he warned that population increases geometrically, whereas food increases only arithmetically, so that population growth cannot keep pace with the growth in food production, and poverty and food shortages are inevitable. It also explains that overpopulation will lead to impoverishment, disease, famine and war. The theory initially attracted the attention of many intellectuals but was soon met with intense criticism.

³ Claire Tomalin. *Charles Dickens A Life*. London: Penguin book, 2011, p.149.

⁴ Dickens, Charles. *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens, Sketches by Boz*, Oxford: Oxford UP, 1957, pp.220-1.

There must have been some few occurrences in the past year to which we can look back, with a smile of cheerful recollection, if not with a feeling of heartfelt thankfulness. And we are bound by every rule of justice and equity to give the New Year credit for being a good one, until he proves himself unworthy the confidence we repose in him.⁵

He stated. This suggests that Dickens strongly wished for a miracle on New Year's Day and Christmas Day, even for the poor and working people. Dickens' biographer, Angus Wilson, has also noted that "The idea of the first Christmas Book, *A Christmas Carol*, came to Dickens at a great Manchester meeting where, sharing a platform with Disraeli and others, he propounded his growing conviction that education was the answer to England's social problem."⁶ In other words, Dickens' idea was that poverty was not something that happened to them by birth or by accident, but they needed to be educated. He believed that lack of education was the cause of poverty.

Gabriel Grub was an ill-conditioned, cross-grained, surly fellow--a morose and lonely man, who consorted with nobody but himself, and an old wicker bottle which fitted into his large deep waistcoat pocket--and who eyed each merry face, as it passed him by, with such a deep scowl of malice and ill-humour, as it was difficult to meet without feeling something the worse for. 'A little before twilight, one Christmas Eve, Gabriel shouldered his spade, lighted his lantern, and betook himself towards the old churchyard.'⁷

The above quote, then, is from Chapter 29 of *The Pickwick Papers* (1836), "Story of The Goblins who stole a Sexton." *The Pickwick Papers* was Dickens' first published full-length novel, in a style that mimics *The Canterbury Tales* (1392), but with elements of picaresque fiction, humor, and pathos. It was also the first novel in which the young Dickens used Christmas as a subject in a novel, and the passage is quoted above. Although only a few months have passed since the publication of his last novel, perhaps the idea of Christmas in Dickens' mind has not changed since his last novel. And in *Christmas story* in the book, a mischievous goblin appears, and a person who digs other people's graves and steals their money and goods is made to feel penitent. Of course, the penitent is portrayed as a very difficult person, who doesn't associate with anyone, is disgusted every time he encounters them, and always glares at them in a mean and grumpy way.

The goblin then converts the gravedigger by showing him various scenes and committing somewhat violent acts.

He(Gabriel Grub) saw that men who worked hard, and earned their scanty bread with lives of labour, were cheerful and happy; and that to the most ignorant, the sweet face of Nature was a never-failing source of cheerfulness and joy. He saw those who had been delicately nurtured,

⁵ Ibid. p.225.

⁶ Angus Willson, *The World of Charles Dickens*. London: Penguin book, 1970, pp. 180-1.

⁷ Dickens, Charles. *The Oxford Illustrated Dickens, The Pickwick Papers*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1948, p396.

and tenderly brought up, cheerful under privations, and superior to suffering, that would have crushed many of a rougher grain, because they bore within their own bosoms the materials of happiness, contentment, and peace. (emphasis mine)⁸

As the underlined portion of the above quote states, 'that to the most ignorant, the sweet face of Nature was a never-failing source of cheerfulness and joy.' The above quote is a good example of how the Christmas Story is a source of cheerfulness and joy. Perhaps, when he wrote this Christmas Story, he conceived of the work in such a way that happy moments would occur even to those who were ignorant in Dickens' "Story of The Goblins who stole a Sexton" is illustrated in Figure. 1. Fig 1 is an illustration of the goblin and the gravedigger in the story of the gravedigger. Dickens expresses the unpleasant character of the gravedigger and his relationship with the goblin by visually appealing to the reader in this way.

I will then focus on *The Chimes*, the subject of this essay, based on our understanding that Dickens skillfully weaves festive elements into a work about Christmas, and that even the poor have commonalities in happiness, joy, generosity, and the penitence of the characters.



Fig 1 : The Goblin and the Sexton



Fig 2 : Trotty Veck by John Leech

II. Ignorance and Poverty in *The Chimes*

The Chimes was written in 1844 as the second work in *Christmas Stories*. The 1840s, when this work was written, were known as the "Hungry Forties", a time of continuous crop failures, polarization of the rich and poor, and a growing threat of national division. This led to an exodus of peasants to the cities in many rural areas, as well as a series of resentful arson attacks on the granaries of farmers and landowners. It was also a time when the radical Chartist movement,

⁸ Ibid, pp.403-4.

which demanded greater voting rights, was active mainly among workers for about 10 years until its decline after 1848. It was during this period that the second of the "Christmas Books" was written, it is *The Chimes*.

The Chimes is divided into four chapters, but as Takayuki Mizuno points out, they are structured differently in the work: the real world of the first two chapters, in which we are introduced to the fictional politicians, such as City Councilor Cute and Assemblyman Joseph Bowley, and the dream Toby (Trotty Veck) had the real world in the first two chapters it is drawn with two contrasts and an element of fantasy: the dream world of the half two chapters.

The Chimes begins on New Year's Eve, when Toby who makes his living as a porter, is waiting for his job to come in, as usual.⁹ And Toby wonders if a poor man like himself deserves to live in the world.

One of the main reasons for his skepticism was a newspaper article. He picked up the newspaper in his pocket and stated the following.



Fig 3 : Alderman Cute and his friends

“Why! Lord!” said Toby. “The Papers is full of obserwations as it is; and so’s the Parliament. Here’s last week’s paper, now;” taking a very dirty one from his pocket, and holding it from him at arm’s length; “full of obserwations! Full of obserwations! I like to know the news as well as any man,” said Toby, slowly; folding it a little smaller, and putting it in his pocket again: “but it almost goes against the grain with me to read a paper now. It frightens me almost. I don’t know what we poor people are coming to. Lord send we may be coming to something better in the New Year nigh upon us!” (emphasis mine, 93)¹⁰

In other words, Toby reads articles about the poor reported in newspapers and believes the newspaper's discourse about the poor as evil. In addition, Toby also says the following.

“It seems as if we can’t go right, or do right, or be righted,” said Toby. “I hadn’t much schooling, myself, when I was young; and I can’t make out whether we have any business on the face of the earth, or not. Sometimes I think we must have—a little; and sometimes I think we must be intruding. I get so puzzled sometimes that I am not even able to make up my mind whether

⁹ In 19th century London, there was a job called porter. The specific job was a profession in which one had no choice but to carry letters, packages, etc., as requested by various people. Toby was offered the job in front of an old church as his permanent place of residence.

¹⁰ Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006. The following quotations are by the same book, and the pages are indicated in parentheses at the end of the quotations.

there is any good at all in us, or whether we are born bad. We seem to be dreadful things; we seem to give a deal of trouble; we are always being complained of and guarded against. One way or other, we fill the papers. Talk of a New Year!" said Toby, mournfully. (emphasis mine, p.93)

Toby comes to his senses when he is approached by his daughter Meg, and when he looks into Meg's eyes, his skepticism is shaken, at least a little bit. Toby, who has been out of work for the past week and has not eaten properly, comes over to deliver a dish called tripe (stewed chicken stomach), a feast for the workers. Meg also reports that she and Richard will get married the next day, as soon as the new year begins. Toby is eating his tripe on the stone steps of a mansion in a state of euphoria when suddenly the door of the house opens and out come the squire, followed by Cute, the city councillor, Filer, the economist, and a red-faced gentleman, whose name we don't know. Toby, who is eating tripe, an uneconomical dish, is sophomorically accused by Filer, the economist, of being a thief, and by the red-faced gentleman, who laments the current times, Toby is convinced of his insecurity and says, " I am not even able to make up my mind whether there is any good at all in us, or whether we are born bad. " Cutes further try to brainwash Toby into believing that poor people are born bad. And they continue, even preaching to Meg and Richard.

"You are going to be married, you say," pursued the Alderman. "Very unbecoming and indelicate in one of your sex! But never mind that. After you are married, you'll quarrel with your husband and come to be a distressed wife. You may think not; but you will, because I tell you so. Now, I give you fair warning, that I have made up my mind to Put distressed wives Down. So, don't be brought before me. You'll have children—boys. Those boys will grow up bad, of course, and run wild in the streets, without shoes and stockings. Mind, my young friend! I'll convict 'em summarily, every one, for I am determined to Put boys without shoes and stockings, Down. Perhaps your husband will die young (most likely) and leave you with a baby. Then you'll be turned out of doors, and wander up and down the streets. Now, don't wander near me, my dear, for I am resolved to Put all wandering mothers Down. All young mothers, of all sorts and kinds, it's my determination to Put Down. Don't think to plead illness as an excuse with me; or babies as an excuse with me; for all sick persons and young children (I hope you know the church-service, but I'm afraid not) I am determined to Put Down. And if you attempt, desperately, and ungratefully, and impiously, and fraudulently attempt, to drown yourself, or hang yourself, I'll have no pity for you, for I have made up my mind to Put all suicide Down! If there is one thing," said the Alderman, with his self-satisfied smile, "on which I can be said to have made up my mind more than on another, it is to Put suicide Down. So don't try it on. That's the phrase, isn't it? Ha, ha! now we understand each other." (104-5)

Some mothers would throw themselves into the river or hang themselves, but Cute was a thoroughly oppressive figure to the poor, repeating this "Put Down" phrase.

Disheartened Toby notices that the sound of the bell has changed, but the sound of the bell is not

as encouraging to Toby as before, but only sounds like a series of words from the Cutes, such as "forbid" and "facts and figures." The sound of the bells here reflects Toby's changing feelings and emotional turmoil as the sound of the bells is portrayed as a suggestion in the direction of Toby's acceptance of their ideas, as the words of the Cutes have remained strong in Toby's mind.

Later, Toby goes to Congressman Bowley with a letter that Cute had told him to write, and Bowley begins to talk repeatedly about being a friend of the poor.

Toby listened with great gravity, and began to feel more comfortable. "Your only business, my good fellow," pursued Sir Joseph, looking abstractedly at Toby; "your only business in life is with me. You needn't trouble yourself to think about anything. I will think for you; I know what is good for you; I am your perpetual parent. Such is the dispensation of an all-wise Providence!

(111)

On the flip side, it reveals Bowley's shrewdness in successfully deceiving the poor, and while he seems to do everything on behalf of the poor, in fact, by not making them think or do anything, we can assume that he is simply using and exploiting the poor for his own convenience, as he sees fit. In other words, Toby is aware of his ignorance, and it is more convenient for Bowley to keep the poor ignorant. Naturally, the ignorant Toby, unable to see through Bowley's trickery, was moved by these words and more convinced than ever that the New Year would never come for someone like him.

Later, when Toby concluded that the poor are born bad, the bell rang and Toby willingly went to the church bell tower, where he passed out.

The latter two chapters turn to Toby's doubts and his being led by the bell into the dream world, where he examines in his dream whether Toby's idea that poor workers are born bad is correct.

Upon regaining consciousness, Toby saw the grotesque Goblin of the Bell, and it pointed out.

"Who hears us echo the dull vermin of the earth: the Putters Down of crushed and broken natures, formed to be raised up higher than such maggots of the time can crawl or can conceive," pursued the Goblin of the Bell; "who does so, does us wrong. And you have done us wrong!" "Not meaning it," said Trotty. "In my ignorance. Not meaning it!" "Lastly, and most of all," pursued the Bell. "Who turns his back upon the fallen and disfigured of his kind; abandons them as vile; and does not trace and track with pitying eyes the unfenced precipice by which they fell from good—grasping in their fall some tufts and shreds of that lost soil, and clinging to them still when bruised and dying in the gulf below; does wrong to Heaven and man, to time and to eternity. And you have done that wrong!" (129)

In other words, this is how we try to correct Toby's erroneous thinking. First Toby is shown dead, having fallen from the bell tower. Then comes his daughter Meg, but there is no Richard next door, and he and Lillian are in a shabby room doing embroidery. When they hear that a banker has committed suicide, both Bowley and Cute only lament his death, even though they both say they

forbid suicide, and Bowley, who claims to be a friend of the poor, only brushes off the workers' plight when they complain of their plight. Then Fern, Lillian, and Richard are corrupted, Fern is repeatedly put in jail and finally hinted at becoming an arsonist, Lillian is reduced to a prostitute, and when she returns to Meg, she finally dies. And Richard, like Toby, is brainwashed by the sacrifices and indirectly shows Toby his mistakes. Meg, who continues to live in poverty, marries Richard and has a child, but Richard dies, leaving behind a young child, and Meg is on her way to the Thames with her child in her arms, where Toby's dream ends. The Goblin of the Bell makes Toby realize his mistake by having Meg end up attempting suicide, the same as her mother in the newspaper article, and he begs the Goblin of the Bell for forgiveness, realizing his mistake in losing the value of his existence as a poor person.

And once again, Toby was led back to the real world, where he awoke from his nightmare to the happy reality of his daughter's marriage awaiting him. Masami Tanabe, commenting on *The Chimes*, said, "Many of the scenes guided by the bell nymphs were centered around his concerns and worries as a petulant father about his only daughter, Meg. I had no time to ask what kind of decision they had reached after being told by City Counselor Cute that "poor people should not get married. However, the image of Meg shedding tears when she came home in the evening was strangely stuck in my mind. Perhaps they would never get married, since Cute had told him so much about it. I had a strong sense of apprehension." He stated.¹¹

As mentioned earlier, on October 5, 1843, Dickens delivered a speech at a meeting organized by the Manchester Athenaeum (The Society of Authors). In this speech, Dickens stressed that poverty and ignorance are the root causes of misery and crime. With this speech in mind, Dickens probably wrote *A Christmas Carol* between early October and November 1843. Next, we will look at the ignorance and poverty depicted in *A Christmas Carol*, which Dickens wrote after his speech on poverty.

IV. Ignorance and Poverty in *A Christmas Carol*

Ignorance and poverty in *A Christmas Carol* can be seen in chapter 3, when the present genie presents the two children to Scrooge.

They were a boy and a girl. Yellow, meagre, ragged, scowling, wolfish; but prostrate, too, in their humility. Where graceful youth should have filled their features out, and touched them with its freshest tints, a stale and shrivelled hand, like that of age, had pinched, and twisted them, and pulled them into shreds. Where angels might have sat enthroned, devils lurked and glared out menacingly. 'Spirit. are they yours.' Scrooge could say no more. 'They are Man's,' said the Spirit, looking down upon them. 'And they cling to me, appealing from their fathers. This boy is Ignorance. This girl is Want. Beware them both, and all of their degree, but most of all beware this boy, for on

¹¹ Tanabe Masami, *Charles Dickens and Christmas*, Kyoto: Apollonsha, 1977, p. 30.



Fig 4 : Ignorance and Want

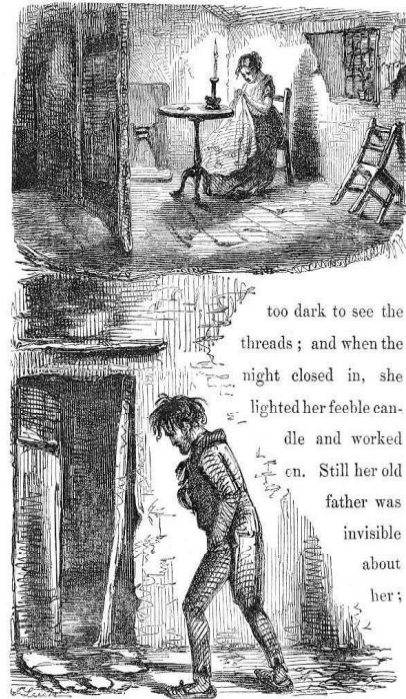


Fig 5 : Richard and Margaret

his brow I see that written which is Doom, unless the writing be erased.¹²

Clearly, this boy named "Ignorance" and the girl named "Want" seem to symbolize the dire situation of the working class. And the word that special attention should be paid to the boy named "Ignorance" was a common perception of workers' problems at the time, and this "ignorance" was seen as the greatest cause of workers' corruption and crime. Hence, it is believed that the depravity and crimes of Toby's close relatives were depicted in the dream world to which Trotty Veck was lured by the Goblin of the Bell.

Furthermore, Fern's niece Lillian follows the path of the fallen woman, Fern commits the crime of arson in despair, and Toby's daughter Meg attempts suicide with her child after impoverishment. After experiencing this tragic ending, and the circumstances that led to it, in the form of a dream, Trotty Veck awakens from his dream and from his thoughts. The first time I saw him, he was a very good friend of mine.

4. Conclusion

In light of the above, we have examined ignorance and poverty in *The Chimes*, and have identified passages in Dickens that, from a young age, confirm his understanding of the feelings and sentiments that the people look forward to Christmas as much as any human being. He then examined the ignorance and poverty depicted in *The Chimes* and found that this was caused by

¹² Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol and Other Christmas Books*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006, pp.92-4.

ignorance due to population growth and income disparity resulting from the Industrial Revolution of the time, and the disparity in education between the rich and the poor. Furthermore, Dickens did not depict poverty only in *The Chimes*, but also in *A Christmas Carol* and in his early work *The Pickwick Papers*, in which he depicted a scene in which he stressed the importance of education to children by including a character of ignorance and poverty in the story of the fiend who snatched the gravedigger. The story was also depicted in "Story of The Goblins who stole a Sexton". In the 1840s, when the nation was suffering, Dickens wrote *A Christmas Carol*, followed by *The Chimes*, which promoted sympathy for the poor and criticism of a society in a state of emergency.

The film seems to have been driven by a strong sense of purpose, to represent the anger of the lower classes who were being crushed by the ruthless attitude of the capitalists and utilitarians. In Trotty Veck and Meg, we see a vision of a society where the poor cannot marry, where the weakest are pushed to the margins, where life is spent in the service of capitalists and utilitarians, but we also see a vision of death and grief for the poor man. With this vision of death and grief, we see a vision of the acts of mercy and charity that Dickens describes in *Christmas Stories* as well as an alleviation of grief. In *The Chimes*, Dickens bitterly criticizes and satirizes the social climate of the time, in which it was desirable for the poor to remain poor and for workers to be content with their status as laborers. As Takao Saijo notes, *The Chimes* was a turning point in the formation and development of Dickens' views on society, as it introduced more social commentary into his style. However, as Chesterton argues, among the five *Christmas Books*, *A Christmas Carol* is by far the most popular and well-known, so *The Chimes*, *The Cricket on the Hearth* and four others have been overshadowed and have not received the attention they deserve, even by many scholars. It is a pity that these four novels, including *The Chimes* and *The Cricket on the Hearth* have remained in the shadows and have not received attention from many researchers. However, *The Chimes* should attract more readers' attention because of its theme, its significant change in the author's novelistic technique, its imaginary aspect, and its projection of the problems of people's lives.

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