CHARLES DICKENS: THE FIRST (INTERPERSONAL) PSYCHOANALYST OR—A CHRISTMAS CAROL: A LITERARY PSYCHOANALYSIS

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Charles Dickens appeared on the British scene in 1812, approximately 300 years after Shakespeare. It may seem to some an exaggeration to connect him with the preeminent writer of all time, William Shakespeare, but I think not. Dickens was primarily a storyteller, not a playwright or poet. But in his understanding of character and society, in the variety, richness, and compelling nature of his storytelling, the comparison holds.

In addition to all his writer's gifts—his marvelous storytelling, use of humor, irony, turns of plot—Dickens offered a relentless social commentary on the pitiful plight of the poor and underprivileged of his time, and on the insensitivity and hypocrisy of the privileged. Just as Shakespeare presented hidden depths in his plays, offering the ethics and values of the society—often unnoticed, as they are in life—Charles Dickens did the same. His experience of having to work in a blacking factory at age 12 because his father was sent to debtor's prison, and early observations of London as a young journalist, led to social activism, as well as works such as "Criminal Courts," "A Visit to Newgate," "Little Dorrit," and "Sketches by Boz," the last reflecting the hypocrisies of middle-class life.

His work calls to mind those of a fellow Englishman of roughly a century earlier, William Hogarth, who satirized the London scene in painting and engraving, and also the work of the French artist Daumier. His novels such as Oliver Twist, Pickwick Papers, David Copperfield, Nicholas Nickleby, and Hard Times reflect his observations of society. Yet many of his novels as exemplified by Great Expectations, Oliver Twist, and Nicholas Nickleby deal with the young and have a happy ending—perhaps to encourage readers, but also perhaps as a wish-fulfillment to make unbearable suffering endurable, offering hope.

Unfortunately there is little time for further biographical anecdote, except to say that he married Catherine Hogarth, who may have been a

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descendant of the artist; he was not as good a husband as one might have expected; and he lived a very rich and full life.

Dickens developed the habit of writing Christmas tales. Today, Christmas tends to be synthetic with its major emphasis on drinking and gifts—a recent trend being the extending of lists of preferred gifts, leaving the giver the task of shopping and paying, but eliminating the true meaning of gift giving—and it is a custom dangerously close to a kind of extortion. In Dickens’ time, when life was simpler and families were together, surely the joy and warmth he portrayed were more consistent with reality, even though he acknowledged that his Christmas tales were somewhat sentimental. Of course, in *A Christmas Carol* exaggeration of the joys of Christmas serves as a foil to emphasize Scrooge’s character.

So, it is on *A Christmas Carol* that I base my contention that Dickens had the understanding of a psychoanalyst and was perhaps the first. *A Christmas Carol* was started between *David Copperfield* and *Oliver Twist* in 1843, the idea coming from his participation in a panel on social injustice in Manchester, along with Disraeli and others. It was the first of his series of yearly Christmas stories. It was read by thousands and celebrated repeatedly at Christmas time—perhaps more for its surface pleasure than for its profound insights. *A Christmas Carol* is more than a story or satire—it is a literary psychoanalysis, largely of the interpersonal variety though with a hint of the Freudian as well.

*A Christmas Carol* is a story of character disorder and alienation. It is also a story of redemption through insight and willingness to expiate one’s sins, which in this case are also the symptoms of cruelties and failings. The organization of this tale offers a deep and touching parallel with psychoanalytic understanding and treatment, with emphasis on the interpersonal, on anxieties aroused by interaction, on lack of self-esteem and character distortion caused by early wounds.

In paraphrasing this tale, Dickens becomes “Dr.” Dickens as the patient “consults” him because his alienation has become intolerable, and because he suffers from unbearable nightmares. As with all patients, Scrooge initially has no or little insight into his own behavior, but due to the skill of his analyst he becomes aware and changes. In this case, insight, change, and reform go hand in hand.

In Dickens’ study and development of the principal character, Ebenezer Scrooge, he details the traumata that led to his character distortions, describing the so-called “anal character” explored by Freud (1916), Abraham (1921), Fenichel (1945), Arieti (1974), among others. Early toilet-training problems are only the first causes of an attempt to gain power by holding on to something—what Arieti considered “the problem of volition”—that