



Darkness Is Cheap¹

Spooky similarities and shared symbolism between A Christmas Carol and Groundhog Day

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At first glance the storylines of “A Christmas Carol” and “Groundhog Day” couldn’t be more different. Written 150 years apart, Dickens story was heavily influenced by social injustices of the time: poverty, child labor horrors, and social class structure. *Groundhog Day* was written on a vastly different social fabric, in a place far removed from foggy-smoggy London: sunny and carefree Los Angeles. The former was penned during the oppressive 1800’s of England, while the latter was created on the golden coast of California in the 1990’s. Perhaps these disparities are most apparent in the overall pessimism of *A Christmas Carol* versus the optimism and somewhat snarky humor of *Groundhog Day*. Each protagonist has a slightly different way of expressing distaste for others and society in general. Scrooge prefers the more enigmatic “Bah Humbug” to articulate his overall disaffection. Phil prefers the slightly more hostile “people are morons.”

Now for some similarities. Winter is omnipresent in each storyline as you would expect given the similar timeframes, but more important are references to the creeping, otherworldly cold. It permeates the neighborhoods, the buildings, the people, and the heart and soul of Scrooge and Phil. It hardens them against the importance of other lives and blinds them to the lack of

¹ The title is a play on Dickens comment in Stave 1 of the original manuscript describing Scrooges’ climb up the stairway after seeing Marley’s face on the door knocker: “darkness is cheap, and Scrooge liked it”.

meaning in their own lives.² Arriving in the cold entry hall of his residence, Scrooge is greeted by an oversized staircase, dimly-lit by street-corner lights. Upstairs, a weakly burning fireplace is all that warms his chambers. For Phil, each morning he struggles to peer through frosted-over windows and then endures the bone-chilling water of a cold shower. Each man arrives at work after trudging through a frozen landscape.

Both men are depicted as miserable, abrasive, self-centered individuals with no apparent friends or lovers. Instead, love is a twisted, perversely directed emotion. Scrooge loves that most elusive mistress of all: money. Phil's is a narcissistic love – Phil only loves Phil – and only sometimes at best. Yet despite this, despite their meanness, despite their lack of empathy for others, each man is unexpectedly given a second chance at life. Scrooge is visited by a specter from beyond the grave – his dead partner Jacob Marley – announcing that Scrooge will be visited by three spirits. For Phil, Ned Ryerson is the corporeal equivalent of Marley. He announces Phil's chance for salvation by trying to sell him some *insurance*. That insurance is a metaphor for Phil's ultimate salvation via the three *spirits* Phil will encounter to guide him on his journey.

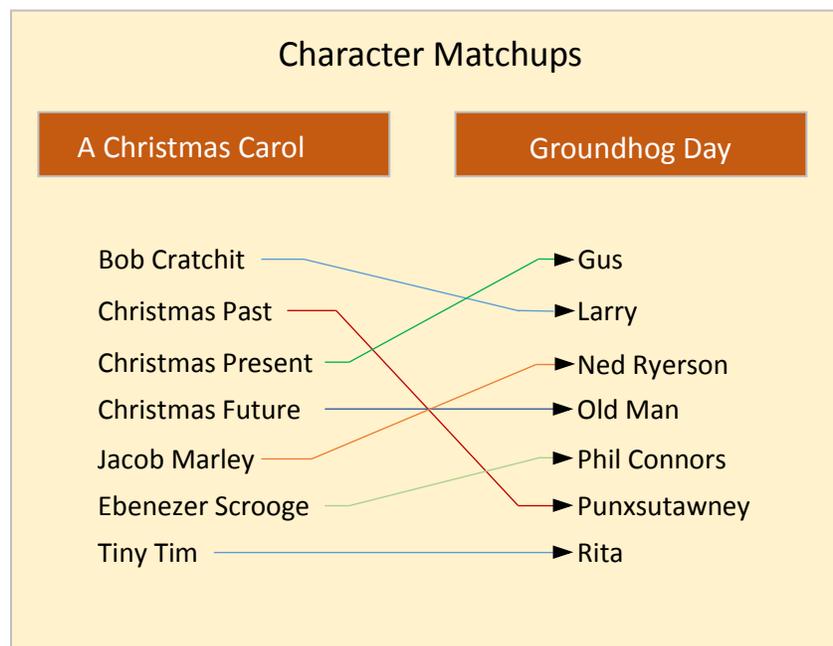


Table 1. Mapping *A Christmas Carol* characters into *Groundhog Day*

² Scrooge's miserly habits allow him to accumulate significant wealth but he does no good with it, dooming him to a pointless existence. Only when we help others, interact with others can our lives be meaningful. Phil leads a significant life as a television weatherman, a high-profile job that touches many lives each day, but his disdain for others negates his ability to lead a meaningful life.

Table 1 illustrates the mapping between characters in *A Christmas Carol* and *Groundhog Day* based on the similar functions. The role of Bob Cratchit's character is mirrored in the actions of Larry the Cameraman; each is a hardworking, low-key employee, exhibiting a touch of sarcasm. Each also has an employer (or self-labelled *talent* in Phil's case) who, in retrospect, wish they had treated those around them better. To make amends, Scrooge surprises Cratchit with a raise (and more coal), and Phil brings Larry hot coffee, ideas for better camera set-ups, and asks him about his family. Phil and Scrooge are starting to act like normal people.

PHIL'S SPIRITS

For the spirit of the past, I posit the town of Punxsutawney itself. It is Punxsutawney that brings back Phil's memories of several past visits, most of them unpleasant. Sadly, unlike Scrooge, Phil seems to gain no inspiration from past events. The spirit of the present is none-other than Punxsutawney resident and Phil's occasional drinking buddy, Gus. Accompanying Phil on numerous adventures, Gus delves into Phil's persona with a few well-timed observations. In the diner he tells Phil, "watch out for your shadow," warning him of the consequences of his actions. In another scene, after enjoying perhaps a few too many drinks, Gus tells Phil, "I picture you as a glass half-empty kind of guy." Finally, Gus answers Phil's question: "What if there were no tomorrow?" with, "Then there would be no consequences." This gives Phil an epiphany and launches him on a path of self-destructive behavior that oddly enough, helps him turn his life around later in the story.



Fig. 1 Phil engaging the Old Man in an alley

As shown in Table 1, Scrooge is of course Phil, and though these two characters differ in age and profession, both conceal a cold and darkness within them. For Scrooge, the spirit of Christmas yet-to-come³ appears only once, while Phil's spirit of the future appears on street corners and in alleyways throughout Phil's stay in Punxsutawney. Phil's spirit of the future is the old beggar man (Fig. 1). At first, Phil tries his best to ignore and avoid him, viewing him with disgust and inexplicable fear. After numerous encounters, Phil realizes (as did Scrooge) that this silent entity is a harbinger of doom. In Phil's case, however, there is no tombstone to point to, no writing to be sponged away. The old man *IS* death – Phil's death – if events remain unaltered.

For a final and seemingly ridiculous matchup: the character of Rita is the equivalent of Tiny Tim. Both characters remind us to see the hope and joy in life; Tiny Tim celebrates the good cheer of Christmas despite his maladies, and Rita tells Phil that repeating a day could be a good thing, "it all depends on how you look at it." Both characters are, in a sense, seen as a prize. For Scrooge, his prize is realized by using his wealth to nurture Tiny Tim to health. For Phil, the prize is an honest and real relationship with Rita, someone he has grown to love. These two 'prizes' are in fact, the casual agents allowing Scrooge and Phil to find happiness and meaningfulness.

Marley told Scrooge on Christmas Eve that he would be visited by a spirit on three consecutive nights, yet Scrooge awakes the next day -- Christmas Day -- transformed. Phil seems to repeat the same day for who-knows-how-many times⁴, only to finally awake transformed, with Rita by his side. How have these transformations been accomplished? The answer lies in an old trope long used in literature: It was all a dream! The spirits did it all in one night.⁵

³ Phrasing used by Scrooge in Dicken's original manuscript.

⁴ Scenes and dialogue in the movie suggest that the viewer has not seen all the repetitions of the day.

⁵ This essay is a follow-up to my earlier exploration of Groundhog Day titled: [Today Is Tomorrow: Ten Thousand Years In Punxsutawney](#).

Bonus Trivia



What happens on the day Phil is in the hospital with the Old Man instead of saving the boy from falling out of the tree? That's him on the right in this photo. He didn't die, he just broke his leg. Did you notice this while watching the movie?