

Chapter 2

"God Bless Us, Every One!": Dickens as Moral and Religious Exemplar

In an 1870 December editorial in the popular illustrated journal Every Saturday simply entitled "Christmas," the writer uses the religious spirit of the season as a springboard to express his desire that all lands adapt a similar spirit and convert to Christianity. The writer concludes the article anticipating the day

when all the tribes and races of men shall keep this high festival together, perhaps, in just recognition of its best apostle, the Santa Claus of its earlier dispensation will give way to ST. DICKENS of the new.

.....we say with Tiny Tim, 'God bless us, every one.'

("Christmas" 858)

Earlier in the century, during a Christmas festival for prisoners, the warden of the State Prison in Massachusetts gathered his charges into the prison chapel and read from A Christmas Carol (Hanaford 336).

These two seemingly disparate uses of Dickens's fiction in nineteenth-century America -- as proselytizer and as moral tonic -- help explain the incredible popularity of his work throughout the period. Examining the cultural forces behind his application as a saint on the one hand, and a social worker on the other, sheds light both on nineteenth-century American culture, and on Dickens's dominance of the literature of the period.

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Simply put, to understand Dickens's hold on the American imagination is to understand the hold morality and religion had on American life. These two forces, when allied with the fervor for reform, touched all aspects of life in nineteenth century America, from fiction to farming, and from science to slavery. The question confronting religious leaders and social reformers was how to spread their message. They soon discovered that the novel, with its felicitous combination of imaginative and intellectual thought, was the perfect vehicle for instituting this divine "plan." And the nationality of the writer made no difference to them. In an 1860 article, ponderously titled "The Attempts of Modern Writers of Fiction to Inculcate Doctrines of Philantropy [sic], and Promote Schemes of Social Reform," a Harvard professor singles out Bleak House as the "finest example" of its kind: "This work alone is sufficient to establish the ability and the right of the novelist to discuss in his writings questions of social and political reform" (Cram 83).

Social policy and religion were often intertwined in nineteenth-century American culture. For example, the American Tract society, during its crusade early in the century, was interested not only in promoting religiosity; its writings and missionaries embraced a wide spectrum of issues that modern sociologists would term secular ills, including substance abuse, addictions to gaming and vice, and more abstract "evils" such as procrastination and materialism (Bode Anatomy 132-140). What injected religion into this moral crusade were the underlying

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Draft #1?

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This is the new introduction from original draft.

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In this chapter, I will describe how these three ideas, morality, religion and reform were reflected and shaped by Dickens's fiction. This chapter will recreate the nineteenth century

¹ I have in mind, of course, Lincoln's apocryphal comment to Stowe: " . . . "

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On December 31, 1870, readers of the popular illustrated journal *Every Saturday* were treated to an editorial combining the religious spirit of the season with a missionary's zeal. After extolling the benefits of Christianity, the writer shifts to a more ecstatic, prophetic tone, envisioning the day when all pagans convert to Christendom. Oddly, given the topic and the season, the article ends not with an homage to Christ or some other established religious figure; instead, the writer concludes the article anticipating the day

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DICKENS of the new.....we say with Tiny Tim, 'God bless us, every one.'" ("Christmas" 858)

Earlier in the century during a Christmas festival for prisoners, the warden of the State Prison in Massachusetts gathered his charges into the prison chapel and, hoping to instill in them a sense of moral purpose, read from *A Christmas Carol* (Hanaford 336). These two seemingly disparate uses of Dickens' fiction in nineteenth-century America – as proselytizer and as moral tonic – help explain the incredible popularity of his work throughout the period. His fiction tapped into the guiding forces of nineteenth-century life, morality and religion, animating the society's concerns over values while affirming its vision of a pious nation blessed and looked over by a benevolent god. Simply put, to understand Dickens' hold on the American imagination is to understand the hold morality and religion had on American life.

While the wealth of books on Dickens and religion and Dickens and morality¹ suggest that yet another examination of these themes would be an exercise in, if not futility than in mere repetition, my emphasis on American life – and by extension culture – marks a distinction between my focus and the focus of the critical works which have preceded it. Specifically, I am interested in religion and morality

¹ Cf. Barbara Hardy, *The Moral Art of Dickens* (1970); Andrew Sanders, *Charles Dickens, Resurrectionist* (1982); Dennis Walder, *Dickens and Religion* (1981)

as a manifestation of a particular culture's values and beliefs. Employing Clifford Geertz's definition of religion as a system which "fus[es] ethos and world view, giv[ing] to a set of social values what they perhaps most need to be coercive: an appearance of objectivity" (131), I use religion, and its handmaiden in nineteenth-century America, morality, as a bridge linking literature to culture. While fiction may seem like an odd example of objectivity, the emphasis by both Dickens and contemporary commentators on the "reality" of his novels, transform these ostensibly fictive narratives into what nineteenth-century readers deemed faithful accounts of the world around them. Other critics, most notably Humphrey House in The Dickens' World (1961) and Alexander Welsh in The City of Dickens (1971), have illustrated the importance of religion and morality on Dickens' reception and influence in Britain, but there has been little work on the way his views of religion affected American readers.

This chapter, divided into two sections, will address this Anglo-centric view of Dickens by illustrating how the moral and religious values set out in Dickens' fiction both mirrored and shaped the values of American society. Specifically, I will examine how his emphasis on a practical, tangible view of morality reflected the prevailing moral standards, leading many to read his fiction as didactic tales meant to reinforce these beliefs. In turn, the linking of morality and religion in nineteenth-century American theology meant that this reading of Dickens as a moralist influenced his reception as religious writer. Accordingly, the chapter moves from morality to religion by examining nineteenth-century American reactions to his fiction, especially the way many readers based their approval of his works on their religiosity. Focusing, in particular, on the reverence bestowed on Dickens' characters and on his tolerant Christian humanism, illustrates how his fiction accommodated and shaped American piety.

Moving from the general to the specific, the second section will focus on a particular work, A Christmas Carol (1843), and examine how it reflected the prevailing religious and moral attitudes of nineteenth-century America. Since Christmas represented an idealized union of spirituality, ethics, and consumerism, the Carol's close association with the holiday in nineteenth-century America reveals how Dickens' blend of art and culture firmly established his place in the religious and moral firmament of America. Throughout both of these sections, contemporary responses to Dickens illustrate how his use of