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ACTORS AND CHARACTERS: MICKEY'S *CHRISTMAS CAROL*

AYANA BENJAMIN

MA, University of Kerala, University of Aberystwyth



AYANA BENJAMIN

ABSTRACT

Marciniak points out that 'fascination with performers' is one of the aspects of adaptations that provide pleasure to the audience. Audiences often choose to watch a particular film adaptation because they appreciate the interpretation of a particular role. If we don't love the actor who plays our favourite character, we might not be able to enjoy a film. This paper suggests that the use of well-established Disney characters in the 1983 adaptation of *A Christmas Carol*, "Mickey's Christmas Carol" makes it viable for the novelette to be condensed to a 25 min short film. It further argues that the appropriateness of certain casts is dependent on the shortness of the video. It also establishes that the existence of a backstory for each actor in the movie makes the work much richer and open to interpretations. The familiarity and understanding of the actors by the audience, helps the quick-paced movie convey the story and the spirit without leaving gaps in narration and leaving the characters vague and undefined. The paper tries to discuss a few instances of the actors such as Goofy playing Jacob Marley and Willie the giant playing the Ghost of Christmas Present bringing in freshness to the old classic characters. It is also suggested that certain minor characters such as the 'portly gentlemen' receive more attention in the movie because of the audience's affection for the actors. The 'originality' that the actors bring to the story makes the movie more than just a repetition of an old story.

Keywords: Dickens, Disney, Adaptation

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1983 Disney short film, *Mickey's Christmas Carol*, established Disney characters enact Charles Dickens's story, *A Christmas Carol*. The movie is directed and produced by Burney Mattinson who has been working for Disney since 1953. The movie was billed as Mickey's 'big-screen comeback', as his last appearance in a film was 30 years before in 1953. The film was released along with a 'The Making of Mickey's Christmas Carol' video. Thomas Leitch, in his book *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents* says, 'An important function of "The Making of Mickey's Christmas Carol" is to shift the subject of "Classic" from Dickens to Disney by invoking a background history that belongs exclusively to the Disney franchise'. He suggests 'Rooting Dickens in Disney Prehistory' as a more accurate title for the video.

Marciniak points out that 'fascination with performers' is one of the aspects of adaptations that provide pleasure to the audience. Audiences often choose to watch a particular film adaptation because they appreciate the interpretation of a particular role. If we don't love the actor who plays our favourite character, we might not be able to enjoy a film. The performance of the actors can change how we see the characters, suggest new subtexts and possibly, establish a new relationship to the book. It can even bring out a marginal character to prominence.

Seymour Chatman says in *Story and Discourse*, 'Some characters in sophisticated narratives remain open constructs, just as some people in the real world stay mysteries no matter how well we know them.' He says it's easier to accept Basil Rathbone as Sherlock Holmes than Laurence Olivier as Heathcliff, despite Olivier being a superb actor. Wolfgang Iser says that while reading a fiction, the readers use the information provided to imagine a character. This is a richer and private experience. Film provides the viewers with a physical perception which cancels out the world of the viewer's imagination.

Unlike Flaubert who refused to allow his books to be illustrated, Dickens, even after becoming an established writer, was convinced of the advantages of the illustrations in his works to himself, the publishers, the illustrators and his readers. He worked in close collaboration with his illustrators giving them a summary of his work and a description of his characters. These illustrations are used by film makers while recreating the characters, costume and setting. Cohen points out that the world in which Dickens was born, unlike our world was deprived of visual material. Dickens was inspired by 'the realistic satires of William Hogarth', 'the grotesque caricatures of Thomas Rowlandson and James Gillray' and 'the illustrations for nursery tales and adult fiction'. Cohen also suggests that just as the prints by Hogarth and his heirs were meant to be 'read', Dickens's prose was meant to be visualised.

Major Disney Characters featuring in "Mickey's Christmas Carol"

Michael Theodore Mouse: Mickey Mouse is Walt Disney Company's most famous character and its mascot. Mickey is seen as a symbol of goodwill and happiness. Mickey is mischievous, forgetful and very imaginative. Mickey is also good at getting out of troubles. He prefers fun and adventure to working. Mickey can lose his temper at times, like his friend Donald and can be clumsy, like his friend Goofy. But generally, he is more reliable and competent. Mickey is understanding and sympathetic and believes that every heart is endowed with some kindness. He is very brave and faces up to every challenge. He is a laid back person who works very hard during difficult times and keeps up his optimism most of the time. Mickey puts the people he loves before himself and is willing to cooperate with his enemies for the greater good. As typical of mice, Mickey loves cheese. Mickey speaks in falsetto.

Scrooge McDuck: Scrooge is a very wealthy, miserly and greedy Scottish duck. He worked very hard to acquire his money and he loves his money very much. However, he is a good-hearted person who values honesty and fair play. The only way in which Scrooge believes wealth should be earned is to 'earn it square'. He was a shoeshine boy in his youth and has worked his way up. He loves his family more than his money. He cares about his nephew and grandnephews, and teaches them his values of honesty and hardwork. He can be bad-tempered and is feared by his employees. Even though he is old, he shows great physical vigour.

Goofy: Goofy is a lovable and charming dog. He is clumsy and childish, and is often embarrassed by his clumsiness. He tries to laugh off his mistakes. He is good at sports. He is very caring and sympathetic. He is a loving and responsible parent to his son Max. He tells his child that his mother is 'up there with the stars'. Max refers to him as 'highly animated'. He talks to himself as it helps him in thinking. He speaks in a low-pitched voice. Goofy is friends with Mickey and Donald.

Morty Fieldmouse: Morty is one of Mickey Mouse's twin nephews. He is a football player with a supportive mother. Morty is portrayed as much more independent than his twin brother Ferdie, with his own friends and hobbies.

Jiminy Cricket: Jiminy Cricket is a small cricket that serves as the conscience of Pinocchio, an animated wooden boy. He is wise, optimistic and often aggressive. Jiminy Cricket is very brave in facing enemies often many times bigger than him. He often makes witty remarks and is attracted to beautiful women. He looks upon Pinocchio as his best friend.

Willie the Giant: Willie is a very powerful giant with powers of flight, invisibility and metamorphosis. But he is not very intelligent and finds it difficult to pronounce certain sounds. Although he was initially portrayed as selfish and uncaring, later he seems to have changed to a more polite nature.

Pete: Pete is a heartless villainous cat most known for being the arch-nemesis of Mickey Mouse. He himself says, 'I was born to cheat and lie!' He is a cunning schemer, a kidnapper and a thief. He is lonely and wants admiration. Pete is jealous of the admiration and love Mickey receives and is determined to torment him. He abuses his son P.J, but spoils his daughter Pistol.

Donald Fauntleroy Duck: Donald is a fiery-tempered duck and one of the best friends of Mickey. He can be rude and selfish, but he is also loyal to his friends. Donald often shows an obsession with wealth. His quick temper helps him fight his enemies however strong they may be. He likes to boast of his skills. He loves his nephews and takes care of them. While he prefers a laidback life, once he sets a goal he is very committed to it.

J. Thaddeus Toad: Toad is the village squire, very rich and self-centred. He has a good heart, but is reckless and has a craze for the latest fads which often causes trouble to his friends who try to protect him. All his interests spiral to mania, be it caravans, motorcars or airplanes. He once accumulates a large amount of debt. He has remorseful moments when he promises himself that he will never be caught in a mania again. However, such resolutions never last. His character as a person of honesty and fairness has been proved in his business dealings.

Daisy Duck: Daisy is Donald's girlfriend who has a positive influence on Donald. She is more sophisticated and while she can go into rages like Donald, she is able to keep her anger controlled. She is nagging and pushy at times. She is often a nuisance to her friends as she enjoys the spotlight. She is very confident, determined and enthusiastic. She is best friends with Minnie Mouse.

Minerva Mouse: Minnie Mouse is the sweet-natured girlfriend of Mickey Mouse. She is very intelligent, kind and sees goodness in everyone. She is loyal, loving and dependable. She expresses her honest opinions however harsh they may sound. She fights the enemies alongside Mickey. She openly shows her dislike of flirtatious men. She is very caring towards her best friend Daisy despite her flaws.

Water Rat and Mole: Ratty and Moley are friends of Thaddeus Toad. Ratty is righteous, cultured and sophisticated. Ratty loves the river and his leisurely life. Moley is very mild-mannered, sympathetic and loyal. Unlike Ratty, Moley is unable to keep up a stern outward behaviour while trying to transform Toad to a more responsible person.

Major Characters in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*

Robert Cratchit: Bob Cratchit works for Scrooge at the counting house. He is paid a very low wage of fifteen shillings a week. He is usually dressed in a tattered comforter. He is a loving husband and father, and is very loyal and forgiving towards his employer, Scrooge.

Ebenezer Scrooge: Scrooge is a miserly misanthropist who is good at his business, but has no sympathy for the poor. He is portrayed as a man who suffered greatly as a child and gradually learnt to put himself and his wealth before the welfare of his fellow beings. His beloved Belle tells the young man Scrooge, 'You fear the world too much'. He is a man who has lost faith in goodness and constantly guards himself against exploitation, showing a complete lack of empathy. However, by the end of the story, he is restored to his sensitivity. He learns to open his heart, to love, care and to be loved.

Jacob Marley: Jacob Marley is already dead when the story begins. He was Scrooge's partner and as ruthless as Scrooge himself. He seems to have been rather friendless as Dickens says, Scrooge was his sole mourner and sole friend. Scrooge refers to him as his good friend.

Marley appears before Scrooge as a terrifying apparition. Marley's ghost tells Scrooge that in life he never roved beyond the limits of their 'money-changing hole', so as a phantom he is obliged to wander the world and witness what he cannot share anymore. Marley regrets not having used the opportunities he had to be kind while he was alive. As a ghost he makes dismal and appalling noises that almost make Scrooge fall in a swoon. The chain that bind the ghost are made of cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledges, deeds and heavy purses

wrought in steel— a sign of all the ills he did to the poor. He offers Scrooge ‘a chance and hope of my procuring’, thus proving to be a good friend to Scrooge.

Tim Cratchit: Tiny Tim is a sickly boy who walks with the help of a crutch. He is a cheerful boy despite his illness. His prayer ‘God bless us everyone!’ shows his good spirit. He has a plaintive little voice and sings a song very well when Scrooge visits the Cratchits during the visit of the ghost of Christmas present. The sympathy Scrooge feels for Tiny Tim shows a change in Scrooge’s attitude towards the poor and suffering. Tiny Tim is remembered after his death by his father to have been patient and mild.

The Ghost of Christmas Past: Dickens portrays the ghost of the Christmas past as a strange figure that looks like a child and an old man at the same time. A bright clear jet of light springs from its head and it carries a great extinguisher for a cap. It has a changing appearance, parts of its body being visible and invisible. Its voice was soft and gentle. It claims to have come for Scrooge’s welfare and reclamation. Its grasp is said to be gentle as a woman’s but not resistible. It speaks very few words, often helping to accentuate the emotions Scrooge feels. It doesn’t preach to Scrooge or criticise Scrooge for his actions and attitudes. It facilitates the self-realisation by its presence, looks and the very few words it utters. However, it does resort to physical force when Scrooge refuses to see any more of his past.

The Ghost of Christmas Present: The ghost of Christmas present is a jolly giant holding a glowing torch. Its eyes were clear and kind. It has a loose garment and no footwear. Dickens says its hair was as free as ‘its genial face, its sparkling eye, its open hand, its cheery voice, its unconstrained demeanour and its joyful air’. It wore a scabbard with no sword. The ghost of Christmas present is a symbol of prosperity, celebration, generosity and goodwill. Unlike the ghost of Christmas past, the ghost of Christmas present delivers many didactic speeches.

The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come: It is covered in a black garment concealing its head, face and its form and moves like a mist. It approaches Scrooge slowly, gravely and silently. The ghost of Christmas yet to come seems to scatter gloom and mystery. Except for one hand no part of it was visible outside its garment. Scrooge feels him to be tall and stately, but it never utters a word. It communicates by pointing his hands where Scrooge must go and inclines his head for a nod of yes. Even though it doesn’t speak, in its presence Scrooge seems to hear words that aren’t spoken. When Scrooge repents ‘the kind hand’ trembles, pointing to the idea that the ghost of Christmas yet to come might be kind.

Fred Honeywell: Fred is Scrooge’s nephew, his little sister Fan’s son. He is good with retorts and renders Scrooge speechless. He says that he has derived good from Christmas, even though he doesn’t profit from Christmas. He calls Christmas a good time, a kind, forgiving, charitable pleasant time. He has invited his uncle for Christmas dinner every year, but Scrooge rudely turns down the invitation. Scrooge asks him why he got married and he replies, ‘Because I fell in love’. We later learn that for Scrooge, wealth is an important aspect in choosing a bride which explains why he mocks his nephew for marrying for love. Fred does not forget to ‘bestow the greetings of the season’ on Bob Cratchit working in his dismal cell. Later, when Scrooge visits his abode with the ghost of Christmas present, we find him expressing his hope that through his persistence in showing his goodwill towards his uncle and giving him the opportunity to experience pleasant moments, he might be able to change his attitude at least slightly.

Fezziwig: Fezziwig is portrayed as a hardworking, but jovial man. His employees respect and love him. He is a merry man who hosts a Christmas ball for all his employees, neighbours and family. Maid, cook, milkman, baker – everyone is invited. He has hired a very talented fiddler to provide music. There is plenty of food and beer. Fezziwig and his wife are the top couple on the dance floor. At the end of the ball they shake hands with every person individually and wish them a Merry Christmas. They do not forget the apprentices either. The old Scrooge comments, ‘The happiness he gives, is quite as great as if it cost a fortune’. He says that his old master’s power lies in ‘words and looks’. He made the employees happy, their service light and a pleasure. And the memories of Fezziwig make Scrooge repent the way he treats Bob Cratchit.

Belle: Belle was a fair young girl who was engaged to Scrooge. Scrooge once loved her, but his priorities changed over the years. She tells the older Scrooge, the man of business, that a golden idol has replaced her in Scrooge’s mind. Belle wanted to marry him when Scrooge had nobler aspirations, when they were both poor and content, and hoped to improve their fortune by patient industry. She shows great insight and

understanding of Scrooge's character and human nature. She says that if Scrooge marries her to keep an old contract, he will surely repent and regret his action. She harbours no ill will. She releases Scrooge with a full heart and wishes him well, while assuring him that any pain that the end of the engagement may cause will not last very long. Later we find her married to another man and surrounded by spiritfule children. Both Belle and her husband think of Scrooge with sympathy.

Mrs Cratchit: We find Mrs Cratchit dressed as finely as she could with the very little money she can afford to spend on clothing. She is often seen anxiously waiting for all her family to reach home. She always tries to keep a cheerful atmosphere at home, trying to point out the blessings rather than the wants. She makes a fine meal for Christmas with their meagre stock, but worries a great deal. She is worried whether the pudding is stolen, or will it break in turning out. Even though she detest her husband's master, Scrooge, and shows it, she is willing to drink to his health for the sake of her husband and because it is Christmas day. She is anxious to protect her husband and children from pain. She tells her children she doesn't want to show her weak eyes to Bob. She delights in the chance of a better prospect for her oldest son Peter. Bob thinks Fred is very right in referring to his wife as a 'good wife'.

The Portly Gentlemen: They are pleasant, polite men who hope to relieve the misery of the poor a little during the Christmas time. They show an understanding of the poor and their feelings. After his change of heart, Scrooge meets one of them on the road and offers, presumably, a huge sum in donation which leaves him speechless.

The Disney characters as actors of Dickens Characters

Kate Griffiths quotes Patrick McGilligan in *Emile Zola and the Artistry of Adaptation*, '...actors who not only influence artistic decisions (casting, writing, directing, etc.) but demand certain limitations on the basis of their screen personas, may justly be regarded as "auteurs".' The Disney actors being well-established screen personas on their own right, bringing with them great scopes and limitations, they have influenced the narrative of the story, and hence become auteurs.

In the video "The Making of Mickey's Christmas Carol" Burney Mattinson is identified as the person responsible for matching the personalities of Disney's characters with the characters of Dickens. The significance of the job is emphasised by reminding that the audience know both the actors and the story very well.

Mickey Mouse as Robert Cratchit: Mickey Mouse is a humble character unlike characters such as Donald Duck. So it is natural that he will not stand up to his boss or talk in a stern voice. Mickey's easy-going nature makes him suitable for his role as a loving pleasant family man. Walt Disney describes Mickey as 'a nice fellow who never does anybody any harm'. Mickey has always been faithful to his girlfriend Minnie which could be seen as parallel to Bob Cratchit who seems to have a good steady relationship with his wife. He is called 'everyman of a mouse' and 'an uncomplicated hero' in "The Making of Mickey's Christmas Carol". His constant, unassuming goodwill make him a perfect cast. Mickey's high-pitched voice is suitable when he talks in humble tones to his boss, and while he keeps a cheerful disposition. The movie does not feature many of the grave scenes in the novel that involves Bob Cratchit. It's questionable whether Mickey's voice would have been appropriate for such scenes as when he breaks down into tears while talking of visiting Tiny Tim's grave. Rotoscoper Mason Smith gives the opinion in the podcast discussing Mickey's Christmas Carol that Fred's hat breaks the cannon of Mickey's ears.

Scrooge McDuck as Ebenezer Scrooge: Scrooge McDuck could be seen as an obvious cast for Ebenezer Scrooge, the Disney character being inspired by the original character Dickens created. Despite being a man of strong ethics and care for his family, director, voice actor, animators and audience seem to find no trouble in accepting McDuck as the actor of Ebenezer Scrooge a mean miserly uncaring person.

Goofy as Jacob Marley: Goofy in the role of Jacob Marley forms the biggest contrast in the movie between the 'actor' and the character. His animator says it was a challenge to make a 'fumbling, mumbling idiot' such as Goofy to be terrifying enough to scare Scrooge. However, Jacob Marley in "Mickey's Christmas Carol" shows various distinctive characteristics of Goofy. There are many comic moments as when he enjoys being praised by Scrooge for being good at cheating people. He also, rather stupidly, pauses and wonders

whether he'll be carrying his chains longer than eternity. Even Goofy's characteristic yelp features in the movie when he trips on the first step on his way back.

Morty Fieldmouse as Tim Cratchit: Morty's reputation as a football player and confident little mouse is less known by the audience and does not hamper their acceptance of him as an innocent invalid deserving sympathy.

Jiminy Cricket as the Ghost of Christmas Past: His animator call him 'a real bright perky kind of character'. Jiminy plays his role effectively as he forms a contrast to the pessimistic disposition of Scrooge and seems the right person to try to instil Christmas spirit in him. He is in his own character someone who tries to teach his companion morals. Film appreciators such as Rotoscoper Mason Smith is of the opinion that since Jiminy is a character no one can hate, his treatment by Scrooge helps highlight the deterioration in Scrooge's character.

Willie the Giant as the Ghost of Christmas Present: Dickens describes the ghost of Christmas present as a jolly giant and Willie seems just the right person. The ghost carries a torch shaped like the horn of plenty and sits on a throne made of a variety of delicious food. This image of the giant person as someone who enjoys the bounties of nature fits very well with the image of Willie. For instance, in "Mickey and the Beanstalk", as Mickey, Donald and Goofy enter Willie's castle, they find a table laid with a sumptuous meal. However, the ghost in Mickey's Christmas Carol is very much Willie himself. He is still unable to pronounce certain words, although if you consider Willie as an actor with a speech impediment, it is natural. When we first see the ghost of Christmas present, we see Willie uttering his magic words, Fee-Fi -Fo-fum, which has no relation to the ghost of Christmas present. There are many allusions to his character as found in "Mickey and the Beanstalk". As Scrooge comes in, he pauses and says 'I smell' and goes on to smell Scrooge out of his hiding. Just as in "Mickey and the Beanstalk", he tries and fails to pronounce the name of the dish, 'chocolate pot roast with pistachio'.

Pete as the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come: The ghost of Christmas yet to come as Dickens describes never shows any part of its body out of its garment, other than one hand. In Mickey's Christmas Carol, we get a fair view of Pete smoking a cigar. While being the scariest of the ghosts Pete seems a right caste, he is playing a role atypical of him, since the ghost has good intentions. The cigar is part of the earlier persona of Pete.

Donald Duck as Fred Honeywell: Clarence Nash who voices Donald Duck says he has 'all the attributes of a human being who expresses sorrow, sadness, a little mischief, a lot of laughter'. However in some respects he forms a contrast with Fred Honeywell. Fred is a very cheerful fellow who seems to be always in a good mood, while Donald is known for his quick boiling temper and is often very grumpy. Donald plays the part of Fred very well, obviously keeping under check his less pleasant side.

Thaddeus Toad as Fezziwig: As far as the character of Fezziwig is shown in the movie, Thaddeus Toad forms a good match. While Toad spends copious amounts of money on his craze of new fads, Fezziwig spends money to bring happiness and merriment to his fellow beings during Christmas time. They both seem characters with good hearts. Unlike Toad, Fezziwig is married and has three daughters. In the movie the role of the fiddler is combined in Fezziwig and the pleasure with which he rapturously plays his fiddle is reminiscent of Toad's pleasure in pursuing his manias.

Daisy Duck as Belle: Although Daisy Duck is said to be a calming influence on Donald, in the movie she is paired with Scrooge and not Fred, the character played by Donald. While this can be confusing to the audience, it asserts the point that the Disney characters are only actors in this movie and do not necessarily maintain their usual persona and relationships. While Belle is as sweet and thoughtful as Daisy herself, Daisy's taste for sophistication and all things fine has no place in this movie. The character she portrays is much more humble and less self-centred. Yet, it doesn't form too much of a contrast as all it requires for Daisy to be Belle is highlight certain traits and hold down certain others.

Minnie Mouse as Mrs Cratchit: Minnie Mouse has no patience with selfish, unrighteous people. Mrs Cratchit judgement on Ebenezer Scrooge at the Christmas dinner would not have been very unlike Minnie Mouse herself if the length of the movie had permitted its addition. Minnie is generally a mild-natured mouse, very considerate towards her friends, boyfriends and relatives. Mrs Cratchit is an equally caring woman.

However, Minnie is a lot more light-hearted and carefree, while Mrs Cratchit constantly worries about her family.

Ratty and Moley as the Portly Gentlemen: This is one of those instances where the audience's interest in an actor makes the character more significant than felt in the written work. The audience of the "Mickey's Christmas Carol" are very familiar with Ratty and Moley, their good nature and propensity to help out others. Ratty speaking in his stiff sophisticated manner and Moley's mild nervous simple speech and manners, and the way in which he follows Ratty's lead are all too familiar to the Disney audience. This makes the 'portly gentlemen', more noticeable as individual characters and not just minor figures helping to bring out the character of Ebenezer Scrooge.

The shortness of the movie makes it more believable when the Disney characters behave out of character. Sure, Donald has a fiery temperament, but it must be possible for him to keep down his temper for 25 min. Sure, Daisy is an attention seeking sophisticated lady, but she can keep her lovable, caring side for just 25 min. But the fact that the audience are familiar with the actors also helps in compressing the novelette into a 25 min movie. Very often you don't need to see the characters in a variety of situations or hear lengthy descriptions to have an understanding of the character. You don't need to see every scene involving Fred to figure out that Mickey's character is a cheerful person who sees the goodness in everyone. You don't doubt Jiminy's ability to teach Scrooge a lesson or two. You don't need the ghastly endless silence and the dark looming figure to understand that the ghost of Christmas yet to come is a foreboding character.

Dickens is prone to providing lengthy descriptions and moralising. "Mickey's Christmas Carol" is a very fast paced short film. The use of already established characters to tell the story helps keep it short without losing the richness. The 'originality' that the actors bring to the story makes the movie more than just a repetition of an old story. It breaks the limits of a short story which often struggles to create round characters rooted in their histories, as the readers/viewers see them only for a very short time and get to understand them through very limited actions. The movie makers do not face the need to create an interest in the characters as the Disney audience are already fascinated with the actors. "Mickey's Christmas Carol" could be seen as an original work with scope for plenty of interpretations.

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