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**GRAND THEFT HOLIDAY:
A METANARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF
DR. SEUSS'S HOW THE GRINCH STOLE CHRISTMAS**

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INTRODUCTION

Theodor Geisel (pen name: Dr. Seuss) published *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* in 1957. In 1966, it was adapted into an animated film by the same name. Ostensibly, it has attained the status of a holiday classic. This study will focus on the 1966 film, as it is likely to be the version with which audiences are most familiar.

The eponymous character is a dour creature leading a solitary existence on a mountaintop. Every year, the Whos of a neighboring Whoville decorate their village in anticipation of Christmas. The noise generated by these festivities so irritates the Grinch that he formulates a plot to ruin their holiday. Disguised as Santa Claus, he visits each home, stealing the villagers' Christmas trappings: the decorations, the gifts, and even the family dinner.

His revenge complete, the Grinch eagerly anticipates the Whos' lamentations on Christmas morning when they discover their things are gone. However, to his great surprise, they are not dismayed by this overnight string of burglaries. Instead, the Whos circle around the tree in the village square to welcome the arrival of Christmas with a song.

Realizing he has been foiled prompts the Grinch to consider that Christmas means more than just gift-giving. Having resolved to turn over a new leaf, he returns everything he stole and even takes part in the celebration himself.

By the end, the viewers, along with the Grinch, realize that Christmas was never actually stolen. All that was taken were objects associated with the secular understanding of Christmas, and these were given back. What is more, Christmas could never have been stolen in the first place because, for Whoville, the holiday signifies something greater than just material things.

At first blush, it would appear that the net Christmases stolen would be zero, because everything was returned in time for the celebration. However, a sleight of hand befitting of a sidewalk monte dealer has taken place. What the narrative presents as Christmas has no business calling itself such. What the Grinch stole from Whoville was not actually Christmas, but if the audience accepts that it was, then it is they who have had Christmas stolen from them.

This is not to say Dr. Seuss intended, or even foresaw, this result, judging by how he disapproved of the commercialization of Christmas.¹ It is not a stretch to think the author might have supported a less materialistic approach to the holiday. The problem is that, while the author was known for inserting moral teachings into his works, he was avowedly coy when it came to spelling out those teachings concretely.² Thus, the work must speak for itself, and what it presents as Christmas cannot be any further from reality.

CHRISTMAS AS DEPICTED IN THE FILM VERSUS WHAT IT ACTUALLY IS

Christmas, as it is understood by the film's characters, is never clearly defined. The audience is shown Whoville's concept of the holiday through how the Whos prepare for the event, and thereafter, how they celebrate it. At first blush, the audience cannot be faulted for agreeing with the Grinch that Christmas involves a great deal of material preparation. Showing all the work and objects that go into a proper celebration of the holiday is crucial to setting up the film's plot. And yet, the closest the film gets to shedding light on the significance of Christmas is showing only what Christmas is not.

The meaning of Whoville Christmas can be inferred from the characters' behavior. Christmas is depicted as an annual festivity. Although its centerpiece is the community-wide exchange of presents that occurs on Christmas day, neither gifts nor gift-giving is the holiday's reason for being. This is the film's theme: it is impossible to steal Christmas if Christmas's focus is on something other than material goods.

Regarding what the film attempts to show as the express nature of Christmas: First, at least in the Grinch's cynical estimation, Christmas is so materialistic as to be devoid of any deeper meaning. The holiday exists so that well-behaved children can anticipate the magical appearance of presents deposited there by a red-clad benefactor; while unbeknownst to them, their parents have signed over second mortgages on their homes to ensure the family can afford everything on their children's wish lists. Admittedly, this comparison is overwrought, but it serves the purpose, and with perhaps as much vitriol as the Grinch himself might appreciate.

This sense that Christmas had become overly materialistic was not lost on Dr. Seuss. His work has been described as decrying that state of affairs.³ What is more, his depiction of the villainous Grinch as Santa Claus doing exactly the opposite of what is expected of Santa produces the irony that drives the story. This is especially true considering that the modern perception of Santa Claus was developed by the Coca Cola Company in 1934,⁴ by which time the author was already in his late twenties.

¹ Nel, Philip. *Dr. Seuss: American Icon*. New York: Continuum Publishing, 2004.

² Bunzel, Peter. "The Wacky World of Dr. Seuss Delights the Child—and Adult—Readers of His Books." *Of Sneetches and Whos and the Good Dr. Seuss: Essays on the Writings and Life of Theodor Geisel*, ed. Thomas Fensch. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1997.

³ Witter, Brad. "Who Was Dr. Seuss' Inspiration for the Grinch? Himself!" www.biography.com. Accessed 21 Dec. 2021.

⁴ The Coca-Cola Company. "Five Things You Never Knew About Santa Claus and Coca-Cola." www.coca-colacompany.com/company/history/five-things-you-never-knew-about-santa-claus-and-coca-cola. Accessed 21 Dec. 2021.

To be fair, Coca-Cola did not create Santa Claus; they shaped the icon into what it is today. The notion of a Christmastime personage pre-existed the company by centuries. Prior to 1934 there was Father Christmas, of English extraction, who wore a crown of holly and carried a Yule log with him; and St. Nicholas, a historical fourth-century Catholic bishop known for his generosity; and even Krampus, an fiendish imp who punished misbehaving children.

Nor, for better or for worse, was the Coca-Cola Company wholly responsible for the changing perception of Christmas. The American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP) lists *Santa Claus Is Coming to Town* as the most popular Christmastime song since its debut in 1934.⁵ The decade of the 1940's would witness such hits as Bing Crosby's *White Christmas* in 1942, which is noted in the Guinness Book of World Records as the best-selling single in history.⁶ It is little wonder, therefore, why those songs are piped in through the speakers of so many shopping malls starting in late November of each year. Meanwhile, such films as *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), *Remember the Night* (1940), and *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), the latter featuring Judy Garland singing *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*, all impelled the corporate redefinition of Christmas.

Naturally, the end goal of these efforts was to maximize profits. Dilution of the holiday to its basest elements makes it easy to market it to the broadest range of potential consumers. From a consumer-facing standpoint, Christmas became a secular, non-denominational, over-sentimentalized season of vague universal well-wishing exemplified by gathering together to exchange material objects. From a business-facing perspective, it boiled down further to: all are welcome, though cash is preferred.

By the time Coca-Cola had published their version of Santa Claus, Dr. Seuss was twenty-seven years old. He was not reared with modern audiences' understanding of Santa as the sleigh-driving gift-bringer holding an ice-cold Coke. The subtext of Christmas-themed music and film in Dr. Seuss's ensuing years would not have been lost on him either, given his background in advertising and his work as a political cartoonist. When *How the Grinch Stole Christmas!* was penned in 1957, it was a reaction to the commercialization of Christmas. This kept with the counterculture image he cultivated, thinking himself to be "subversive as hell."⁷

Second, Whoville Christmas is understood to be a happy event. This is apparent by how much the killjoy Grinch dislikes it, but also by how the Whos celebrate the holiday: with singing, family gatherings, feasting, gifts, and so on.

⁵ Fitzpatrick, Molly. "All the Most Popular Christmas Songs Are From the '40s and '50s." www.vocativ.com/culture/music/most-popular-christmas-songs/index.html. Accessed 21 Dec. 2021.

⁶ Id.

⁷ Cott, Jonathan. "The Good Dr. Seuss." *Pipers at the Gates of Dawn: The Wisdom of Children's Literature*. New York City: Random House, 1983.

Third, and related, Whoville Christmas is not about the aforementioned holiday activities; rather, the activities point to the deeper meaning of Christmas. As much is apparent from how the Whos are unaffected by the theft of their Christmas paraphernalia. What the Whos really think Christmas means is encapsulated in the lyrics to their song near the end of the film:

Christmas day is in our grasp
So long as we have hands to clasp

Christmas day will always be
Just so long as we have we⁸

Thus, for Whoville, Christmas evokes sentiments of charity and community. Absent is the sugar-coated sentimentality shot through holiday-themed Hollywood productions the 1940's. Gone too is the sense that children should be showered with presents if they comport themselves adequately. The ideas Whoville Christmas promotes, while admirable to an extent, still fall short of the mark when it comes to what Christmas actually is.

The meaning of the word, Christmas, ought to be self-evident. The word is so composed because it follows the same conventions as other Catholic holidays, for instance: Michelmas (the Mass of St. Michael the Archangel) and Candlemas (a Mass to which the faithful bring candles to have them blessed). Thus, Christmas literally means "Mass of Christ," the word for this holiday having entered English parlance in the year 1038.⁹

A CHRISTMAS SLEIGHT OF HAND

The film takes pains to show that, in spite of the Grinch's villainy, he could not steal Christmas. And yet, if there is anyone from whom Christmas has been stolen, it is the audience.

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, the film insinuates that what Whoville calls Christmas is an accurate portrayal of Christmas. Why else would the film refer to the holiday as such? The film could just as easily have called the event "Whoville Holiday" or some other made up name. Imaginative as he was, Dr. Seuss could have devised completely fictitious traditions for Whoville that nonetheless draw parallels to their real-life counterparts and still not have called it Christmas.

The truth is that Whoville Christmas has nothing to do with actual Christmas. Nowhere in Whoville are found a nativity scene or a religious service, let alone so much as any mention of Christ. In their place is a secular, milquetoast aspiration to appreciate one's state in life. In fairness, the reasons for this secular depiction may have been prudential considerations. The author, well-meaning as he may have been, might have decided against a more accurate depiction of the holiday out of fear that his rendition would have caused outrage. Even so, Whoville Christmas is so watered down that little remains to instill controversy, because so little of significance remains at all.

⁸ Hague, Albert and Dr. Seuss. "Welcome, Christmas (Reprise)." *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, Turner Entertainment Co. and Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., 1966.

⁹ Martindale, Cyril Charles. "Christmas." *The Catholic Encyclopedia*. Vol. 3. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1908. www.newadvent.org/cathen/03724b.htm. Accessed 21 Dec. 2022.

Making matters worse, everything in the film validates Whoville's conception of Christmas. Every last Who is perfect. No one is shown bickering with in-laws, or keeping up with the Joneses to see whose home is better decorated. No Who is envious of what another Who is getting for Whoville Christmas. Not a single Who child is a spoiled brat—quite the contrary, Cindy-Lou Who is such a paragon of childish innocence that she fails to see through the Grinch's obvious lies. Collectively, the Whos are so heroically virtuous that even in the face of their victimhood at the Grinch's hands, they do not so much as flinch. Thus, what is shown on screen is not Whoville Christmas but idealized Whoville Communism. Whoville is a worker's paradise where material goods are so perfectly distributed that no one bats an eye at having all their personal belongings taken away in a fell swoop; rather, everyone is content to have each other, and it is this esprit de corps among the working class that they value above all else.

Witnessing this virtue (so called) is what causes the Grinch to undergo his one-hundred-eighty degree turn. Such contrasts as between the Whos and the Grinch may make for entertaining drama, but they also risk devolving into virtue-signaling, as happens here. Perhaps the Whos are virtuous because they know the meaning of Whoville Christmas; or maybe Whoville Christmas just brings out the best in everyone, all the more so the Whos, they being such fervent adherents to their holiday.

Either way, the Whos and their point of view cannot be wrong because the film's narrative will not allow it. If plot armor is the Kevlar vest that keeps film protagonists from dying until the writers think it expedient, then Whoville might as well be a concrete bomb shelter from how safe the Whos are from reproach.

The Whos are clearly in the right because the film says they are. They are the victims, not the perpetrators. This alone does not make them heroic, but it keeps them from being cast as anything approaching villainous. Furthermore, by the end of the film, the antagonist accepts their ways as righteous. Why, then, should the audience disagree? The film leads the viewers by the nose to this conclusion, and then rubs their faces in it until any resistance to the message is smothered.

Because Christmas is the celebration of the birth of Christ, the holiday is meaningless when all references to Christ are removed. Nowhere in the film is there any mention of Christ in word, image, or insinuation. By comparison, the Christmas tree, the gifts, the decorations—in short, everything having to do with secular Christmas, is in plain view. It would seem that, for all of Dr. Seuss's gripes about the commercialization of the holiday, the film does little to counteract it. Indeed, the film's depiction of Christmas as something other than what it really is may well have contributed to the problem Dr. Seuss set out to rectify, especially when one considers the film's extensive merchandising during the holiday season.

END OF REPORT