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## Themes on a Christmas Carol

One of the lasting themes in *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens is the pursuit of wealth for its own sake without social responsibility. Scrooge sits in his counting house, oblivious to his own material needs and those of his employee, Bob Cratchit.

The relationship between manager and employee has rarely been more pertinent than it is today. Suppose, instead of focusing on the human condition, Dickens had looked at the job itself. Suppose the spirits who visit Scrooge after he has seen the apparition of his late partner, Marley, are concentrating on something other than his personal history and prospects. Imagine, for instance, he is visited by the spirits of jobs, past present and future. What would they have beheld?

A condensed version of the story might have started thus:

The job was dead to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. Dead as a doornail. Scrooge knew it was dead. Scrooge was the employer and Scrooge needed no more jobs, not in the ordinary course of events.

Hard and sharp as flint - a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner - Scrooge sat in his counting house on a cold bleak, foggy Christmas Eve. 'You'll not be in tomorrow, I suppose,' he said to his solitary clerk.

'If quite convenient, sir.'

'It's not convenient,' said Scrooge, 'and it's not fair. Expecting the employer to shoulder every social responsibility. If it's not holidays, it's maternity leave, sick pay and pensions. Bah. Humbug,' said Scrooge. 'You'll be downsized, soon enough. Downsized or outsourced.'

Scrooge stepped out into the cold, misty City streets and wound his way through the throngs of last minute shoppers until he came to the chambers he had once shared with his former partner, Marley. Was that Marley's face upon the knocker. ' said Scrooge to himself, twitching his eyes. Settling himself in his nightgown, a bowl of gruel on his lap, he tried to rid himself of Marley's image. But the face was everywhere about the room. A noise of dragging chains and footsteps, at first faint, now clearer, could be heard beyond the bedroom door.

The apparition as it passed through the door was visible at once as Marley, dragging his heavy chain fixed to cash boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers and deeds.

'Who are you?' asked Scrooge.

'Ask me who I was. This chain, these boxes, these trappings of the job. I wear the chain I forged in life.' The spirit looked Scrooge in the face. 'I am here to warn you. You may yet escape my fate, Ebenezer. You will be visited by three spirits on successive nights.' The fading apparition swirled throughout the open window out into the night. Scrooge tried hard to say 'humbug' but could not and dragged himself back to sleep. It was already dark when he awoke to hear the clock striking the hour that Marley had foretold.

A light flashed inside the room and a hand drew aside the curtain of his bed. It was a familiar figure, dressed in a boiler suit, holding a spanner in the other hand and wearing a flat cap. 'I am the ghost of employment past,' it said.

Holding Scrooge by the hand, he guided him out into the high street. Here was the bank with its tall marble pillars, crafted plasterwork and long counters staffed by clerks stamping passbooks, counting change and banking the contents of weekly wage packets. Managers sat behind oak desks in private offices, sipping tea brought by their secretaries. Outside town in the car factory, the workers had their precise jobs defined and their unions ensured that demarcation lines were maintained. The staff, their nomenclature dictated by their white collars, had their desks and telephones and adding machines and reporting structures.

One of the boiler-suited figures was complaining to the bank clerk. The wage negotiations had been going badly. 'They can't make the five-per cent limit stick,' he said. 'We took the vote on a show of hands. We're out tomorrow.'

No sooner had the image faded than Scrooge beheld another figure before him. A pin-striped woman? Scrooge blinked. She was so young.

'I am the ghost of employment present,' said the spirit. It was Christmas morning now and Scrooge found himself standing in the City streets, scored by freshly dug trenches awaiting plastic cables for the information super-highway.

There was Scrooge's clerk, Bob Cratchit, struggling to get away from the traffic lights in his company Vauxhall Cavalier, still brand new. There was Tiny Tim, sitting up in his Nuffield bed, paid for using Bob's Bupa membership. Bob had made the most of his flexible benefit: extra holidays, private medical insurance, company car. It helped subdue the fears arising from the negative equity in the mock Georgian 'executive' home he had bought at the height of the property boom.

The spirit pulled Scrooge by the hand, moving through the night, across the land, to a former council house in Nottingham where a miner, not long redundant was feasting his family. 'It's not going to last but the re-training might work if there's a job at the end of it,' he said.

They passed students, drinking away the future with their talk of travelling the world and working for nothing. They saw worried faces on redundant middle managers, wondering how long their temporary work and casual opportunities could stave off house repossession, and they saw the homeless, long since deserted by hope. They passed a director, pondering the financial pages, working out the best time to take his share options, knowing that in a downsized, delayed workplace his own options were running out. Time to telephone the headhunter.

As the spirit disappeared, Scrooge prepared himself for the final phantom as it emerged from the gloom. 'Ghost of employment future. I fear you more than any spectre I have yet seen,' said Scrooge.

The ghost said nothing but pointed to an empty office block. A middle-aged man, was it Cratchit? stood on the pavement looking bewildered. He was speaking to Tiny Tim held in his arms: 'No one told me about this Tim. I thought I had a job for life and it's gone. That old skinflint Scrooge said he wanted a leaner organisation. He could get my job done more cheaply outside. The outplacement was helpful. I have a short-term contract now but frankly its not as good as before.'

'Never mind, Tim. Something will come up.'

The mist descended and when it lifted they were back in Scrooge's chambers. Time had passed. Scrooge himself was nowhere to be seen. A computer terminal sat on a desk. In came Bob Cratchit, wearing jeans, with Tiny Tim bouncing after him, now not so tiny. 'Once we've removed this, Tim, that will be the end of it. He never realised. Who needs a counting house when you have software systems? Who needs an office when you can work from home? Those computer games you played in hospital served you well. We can live on the royalties from your Sonic Scrooge game for the rest of our lives.'

The spirit showed Scrooge one last image - a gravestone on which he could just make out the inscription. It said: The job.

'So it's true,' said Scrooge who emerged from the haunting a wiser man. Renaming his business Scrooge Management Consultancy, he passed on the accounting work to Cratchit Systems Inc, took time out, wrote a book, became a guru, joined the lecture circuit and lunched on other people's expense accounts. 'Work?' he said. 'This is what I call work.'

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