

Life story of Ebenezer Scrooge

Ebenezer Scrooge was a financier whose story begins in London, England, in the 1800's. He achieved success through hard work and keeping a determined focus, until eventually, reaching a time in his life when the significance of his presence here on earth became a question to ponder, his life took a turn – not so much in a different direction as into a different frame of mind.

Not until Charles Dickens created this character from his 31-year-old imagination, in 1843, did London society become aware of Ebenezer Scrooge. The character did arrive with a past, however, and not simply as a fully developed man out of nowhere with the story progressing from there. How he evolved into a successful, though apparently miserly, financier, was an essential part of Dickens's story, told through the visits of ghosts.

Writing in the Victorian era, Dickens's emphasis in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) was on family values and the spirit of Christmas. A major theme in his book was the problem of children growing up in poverty in industrialised Britain. As we discover during the telling of *A Christmas Carol*—by its narrator, Dickens, through the visit of the Ghost of Christmas Past, Ebenezer had a difficult time as a child, abandoned by his father to the boarding school he attended, where his friends were the literary characters of classic works, until eventually, one Christmas, his sister arrived to take him home.

As a young man, Ebenezer had been apprenticed to the merchant, Fezziwig, a jolly, generous, happily married man, who he described later to the Ghost of Christmas Past as someone who had “the power to render us happy or unhappy; to make our service light or burdensome; a pleasure or a toil” (Ibid). But as time went on, Ebenezer's life had taken a different path from that of Fezziwig's. Gradually he withdrew from the woman he had promised to marry when both of them were young and poor, until finally she confronted him with the changes she had seen in him and walked away from their relationship. Committed to the accumulation of wealth, he chose career over love and marriage, telling her, “This is the even-handed dealing of the world. There is nothing on which it is so hard as poverty; and there is nothing it professes to condemn with such severity as the pursuit of wealth!” (Ibid.)

Siding with Ebenezer, Philosophy professor Michael Levin has defended his chosen career and business practices, though questioning the inevitability and fairness of the fate that lay before him, saying:

There can be no arguing with Dickens's wish to show the spiritual advantages of love. But there was no need to make the object of his lesson an entrepreneur whose ideas and practices benefit his employees, society at large, and himself. Must such a man expect no fairer a fate than to die scorned and alone? (Levin, 2000)

While the idea of compassionate love towards one's fellow human beings was the main idea that Dickens was attempting to get across, and Levin has counteracted Dickens's character construction with glowing endorsement of Ebenezer's business sense, there are other themes in *A Christmas Carol* that also deserve attention.

Dickens lived in a period of history when the ideal of marriage and the family was considered vital for the fulfilled life, if not morally necessary. Furthermore, it is Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Philip Allingham has explained,

that has preserved the Christmas customs of olde England and fixed our image of the holiday season as one of wind, ice, and snow without, and smoking bishop, piping hot turkey, and family cheer within. Coming from a family large but not-too-well-off, Charles Dickens presents again and again his idealised memory of a Christmas associated with the gathering of the family which “bound together all our home enjoyments, affections and hopes” in games such as Snap Dragon and Blind Man’s Buff, both of which his model lower-middle-class father, Bob Cratchit, runs home to play on Christmas Eve (Allingham, 2000).

Having rejected love and marriage, Ebenezer chose instead to focus on developing his career and acquiring wealth. Acting on fears held onto since childhood, Ebenezer had decided that the guarantee of a stable future was of utmost importance, not exactly taking priority over personal happiness but seemingly becoming its essential ingredient. But where the point of difference is, in terms of career – between necessity and desire, and in terms of accumulation of wealth—between necessity and greed—is not a matter to be dwelt upon here.

Ebenezer never married, as far as we know, though we wouldn’t have heard how his life turned out. When we first encountered him, he was quite likely close to middle age or even older – at that time in life when thoughts of growing older and dying, and of the significance of life, often come upon people. But he was a self-made businessman, along with partner Jacob Marley, until Marley’s death seven years prior to the beginning of *A Christmas Carol*, when the story of Ebenezer’s transformation begins.

At the start of Dickens’s story, it is established that Marley is dead, and has been for seven years. Ebenezer spends the day at work in his counting-house, while his clerk, Bob Cratchit, works in the outer cell. As usual, he treats Bob with disdain. Now, Ebenezer is being haunted by reminders of Marley, and by spirits in the night.

That evening, after returning to his home, he is visited by Marley’s ghost, and by the Ghosts of Christmases Past, Present, and Future. The ghost of Jacob Marley comes to him first, to warn him to change his ways, followed by the Ghost of Christmas Past, who shows Ebenezer scenes from his past – of his childhood and apprenticeship, and of the ending of his relationship, causing Ebenezer to weep.

The Ghost of Christmas Present appeared next, taking Ebenezer to visit Bob and Mrs Cratchit and the little ones, and to nephew Fred and his family, and to many others—to where the miners lived, the hospitals, the poor houses and the prisons—to witness their Christmas celebrations, or their day of renewal of hope. All the while, Ebenezer had noticed that the Ghost was visibly growing older, leading to the following exchange:

‘Are spirits’ lives so short?’ asked Scrooge.

‘My life upon this globe, is very brief,’ replied the Ghost. ‘It ends to-night.’

‘To-night!’ cried Scrooge (Dickens, 1843).

The Ghost’s response caught Ebenezer off-guard. He had probably not given much thought

before to his own mortality. Even his partner's demise seven years earlier had not affected him.

That same night, during his travels with the Ghost of Christmas Future on the streets of London, Ebenezer looks for himself, but he is nowhere to be seen. The Ghost takes Ebenezer to his home—to his own bedroom—where “unwatched, unwept, uncared for, was the body of this man” (Ibid.). They headed then towards his grave, which would be untended, so that he could see what the future held. But first, there was something else he had to see:

Scrooge hastened to the window of his office, and looked in. It was an office still, but not his. The furniture was not the same, and the figure in the chair was not himself (Ibid.).

No small matter for a man to see for himself such a bleak future ahead of him, and on top of that, this forewarning of the fate of his business.



Scrooge & Bob Cratchit. Illus. by John Leech
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One might wonder what was going through Ebenezer's mind. His emphasis on economic security may have been the way things were, but it is not an old-fashioned concept, nor an out-of-date concern. His apprehension about the future would be shared by many people, then and now. But he was self-employed, and not a family man. As a bachelor, growing older, this would have been the time to reflect upon his future, and the fate of his business.

Being self-employed brought its own problems, in terms of retirement and the future of all that he had worked for. Having no family, and living a bachelor's life, added a further burden to the challenges that lay before him. There was no safety net—no employer from his place of work nor wife at home—for Ebenezer.

In Dickens's tale of the ideals of family togetherness and compassionate love towards one's fellow human beings, and of capitalism and entrepreneurship, there has been an underlying thread emphasising the significance of work in a man's life. However, for some, work takes place, not only within the life cycle of the individual but as part of the continuing intergenerational cycle of life and death.

For Ebenezer, living a life that, to some extent, fell outside traditional norms, due to his choice to remain single and live alone, life would not have been easy, particularly as he was no longer a young man. Prioritising his work and choosing to remain single, as he grew older, Ebenezer would have had to find solutions to suit his circumstances. True to the nature of fiction, and managing to condense a lengthy process into an overnight miracle, Ebenezer awakens the next morning a changed man, ready to celebrate Christmas with his nephew and extended family, do good deeds in his community, and meet with his clerk, Bob Cratchit, over a bowl of smoking bishop, to discuss Bob's life and presumably, to start making changes to his own work-life.

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