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Vicious Cycle

In *A Christmas Carol* (1843), Charles Dickens delves deep into the destructive forces of greed and fear and how they impact moral character. Ebenezer Scrooge is a cruel, bitter man who lives only to serve himself and his business. Being of great wealth, Scrooge believes that he lives a successful life, due to his escape from poverty, yet he fails to see all that he lacks. He turns away from humanity and is so emotionally impoverished that he scorns Christmas, failing to see the joy and love the holiday brings. Through Scrooge's journey with the three Spirits, Dickens reveals that Scrooge was not always a hateful man, but fear molded him into an uncharitable monster who mistreats those around him. Scrooge's greatest fear, like that of many in the Victorian Age, is an impoverished life. This fear leads to an intense fixation on money, to the point where that is all he cares about. Yet it is never enough for Scrooge; no matter how much wealth he attains, his fear is always haunting him. Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* highlights a vicious cycle of pursuing wealth to escape fear as Scrooge becomes obsessed with accumulating more wealth to evade the horror of suffering in poverty. Yet as Scrooge obtains more and more money, he only generates more fear, and experiences a different type of poverty as his love and morals are stripped away, leaving behind a bitter, selfish man whose ignorance to the world, unless rectified, will lead him to an eternity of punishment.

During Scrooge's revisit of his past, Dickens utilizes Scrooge's former fiancée to highlight how fear has influenced Scrooge's intense need for wealth, and thus has contributed to the detriment of his moral character and moral knowledge. During their argument, Belle tells Scrooge that the reason for her departure is that Scrooge no longer loves her; instead, "another idol has displaced me" (Dickens 286). Baffled, Scrooge asks what idol has he replaced her with,

and she tells him “a golden one”(286): money. Her response indicates that at this point of his life, Scrooge has allowed wealth and money to consume him, to the point where he no longer cares about the people he loves, or perhaps no longer loves them at all. Dickens’s use of the word “idol”(286) personifies wealth and places it on the same level of that of a god or a hero; something that Scrooge worships. Where he once adored Belle and the love she gave him, Scrooge now devotes himself to riches. Scrooge tries to justify his fixation with money, declaring that “there is nothing on which it is so hard as poverty”(286), and that “the pursuit of wealth” (286) is the only thing that can save one from living an impoverished life. With this justification, it is revealed that Scrooge’s greatest fear is being poor; to him, that is the worst thing that could happen in the world. This fear is what leads to his constant fixation on money, because in his eyes, the more money he has, the more protected he is from a life of poverty. Scrooge’s intense aversion to an impoverished life stems from how the world treats the poor, which is mirrored in his own treatment of the poor. When asked by two gentlemen to donate money so they can provide food and shelter to the poor, Scrooge refuses. One of the gentlemen protests that the poor will die without these provisions, but Scrooge only responds that if they die, “they had better do it, and decrease the surplus population”(268). His callous comment reflects the judgement and poor treatment that he himself fears of receiving if he did not have his wealth. He believes that if he were poor, society would not only turn their backs on him, but would encourage his demise. This relates to the problem of society as a whole; poverty invokes such dread in people to the point that they will do anything to keep it at bay, even if that means shunning those who need help. In doing so, these people slip away from their morals as they do whatever it takes to remain wealthy at the expense of others, as Scrooge has done.

As he feeds into his fear, Scrooge continues to increase his wealth and while he indeed gains money and comfort, he suffers great losses as well; as the novel indicates, Scrooge becomes deprived not only of love, but of morality. He has, in a sense, traded one form of poverty for another. The girl he once loved now “matters very little”(286) to him, as all he cares about is his own financial gains. Despite the fact that Belle chooses to leave him, Scrooge lost his love long beforehand; his journey to wealth has long since left him to be consumed by his own greed and ambition, leaving no room for love nor any other substantial values. In addition to losing his beloved, Scrooge also loses himself. As Belle saw firsthand, Scrooge became so engrossed by “the master passion, Gain”(286) that his “nobler aspirations fall off one by one” (286) as his quest for riches turns him selfish. Dickens’s capitalization of the word “gain” personifies it and further emphasizes the power that gaining riches has over Scrooge; he cannot control his greed. The influence greed has over Scrooge is further emphasized through the characterization of Want, who is presented to Scrooge by the Ghost of Christmas Present. Want is shown to be a girl who is unlike any ordinary child. Her features are quite disturbing; instead of being filled with youth and grace, “a stale and shriveled hand, like that of age, had pinched and twisted them”(304). The ugly features of Want emphasises how greed ruins men by starving them of their morality, which has indeed happened to Scrooge. Much like how the girl has been stripped of her youth and grace, Scrooge has been stripped of his integrity and kindness. Through the overall observation of Scrooge’s nobler goals falling as he continues to gain money, Dickens depicts the contradictory manner of obtaining wealth; the more material “gains” Scrooge acquires, the more he loses morally.

Despite the many losses Scrooge faces, he is ignorant of the horrible person he has become. His encounter with Marley's Ghost reveals how his ignorance, particularly in terms of morals, has increased along with his wealth, further suggesting that greed breeds moral impoverishment. When Marley's ghost comes to visit Scrooge, he bemoans the opportunities he missed in life, to which Scrooge responds, in an attempt to reassure him, "But you were always a good man of business, Jacob"(275). Rather than being comforted, this remark sets Marley off on a rant of his regrets, dismissing his deals and trades as "but a drop of water in the comprehensive ocean of my business"(275). He declares to Scrooge that "the common welfare was my business: charity, mercy, forbearance, and benevolence, were, all, my business"(275); those were the businesses that he should have tended to when he was alive, rather than the business that he and Scrooge ran together. Here it is highlighted the differences between Scrooge and Marley in terms of business, as well as the complete lack of knowledge that Scrooge possesses. To Scrooge, in his ignorance and greed, the mark of being good in business is being a skilled businessman. In his eyes, because his wealth has allowed him to be safe from his fear of poverty, he has lived a good life; therefore he conflates financial success with success in life. He has no desire to be charitable or merciful; acquiring a profit is all that matters to him, so he can continue to keep his fear at bay. Marley used to share that belief, but in death has realized that it is more important to be good in the business of morality; being a selfless person who is benevolent to all is what makes one's life significant. Marley was indeed a good business partner with Scrooge, but he greatly lacked in the business of morality; he was a cruel, selfish, and greedy human being. He learned too late the importance of being a man of morals, and he is doomed to spend the rest of eternity weighed down by his sins and regrets.

Scrooge's ignorance begins to fade as he is visited by the supernatural; his interactions with Marley's Ghost and the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come in particular strip away a majority of his ignorance and in doing so, installs within him a new fear. When Marley's Ghost visits him and warns him of what is to come, Scrooge attempts to reassure Marley so he himself can be reassured of his fate. Scrooge compliments Marley on being a good man of business, and in doing so he "now began to apply this[being a good man of business] to himself"(275). In comparing himself to Marley on being a good businessman, it is an attempt not only to reassure Marley of what he believes is success, but also to reassure himself that he is living a satisfactory life with no regrets, as he and Marley are considered to be one and the same. While indeed Scrooge has the same head for business that Marley has, he also has the same flaws; he is bitter, merciless, selfish, and cruel. His abhorrence to Christmas and to aiding the poor is what limits him from living a fulfilling life, and is what is leading his soul to eternal punishment. As Marley tries to warn Scrooge, his limitations concerning morality are what will truly ensure that he and Marley will be one and the same. Unless Scrooge learns to be selfless and kind, they will share the same fate of suffering, stuck in a place where "no space of regret can make amends for one life's opportunities misused"(275). Marley's warning is frightening to Scrooge; he "trembled more and more"(274) as Marley tells him about his penance, and begs him to "Speak comfort to me"(274). Scrooge's ignorance over the consequences of his life begins to fade. He cannot so easily brush Marley's warning away; "he tried to say 'Humbug', but stopped at the first syllable" (276) because he knows that Marley speaks the truth. It is at this point of the novel where Scrooge begins to fear punishment for his actions. His journey with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come only amplifies this fear as he gets another warning of what his fate will be if he does not

change. Upon showing Scrooge his dead body, the Spirit reveals that no one is mourning Scrooge; the rich are all wondering whether they can obtain Scrooge's inheritance, and the poor steal his things and sell them for a profit. Despite Scrooge's pleas to see "some tenderness" over his death, "the only emotion that the Ghost could show him, caused by the event, was one of pleasure"(311). The final thing that the Spirit shows Scrooge is his lonely grave, which is where Scrooge's fear reaches a climax as he realises what his greedy, uncharitable life has led to. Scrooge's eyes are finally opened to all that his wealth has cost him; besides love and morals, his cruel behavior has led to an utter lack of companionship. At this moment, Scrooge's greatest fear is no longer that of financial poverty, but what his fate will be if he does not change. It is here where Dickens highlights the somewhat tragic irony of Scrooge attempting to use wealth to escape his fear of poverty; in the end, Scrooge is only met with more fear and moral poverty. The grave drives home the Spirit's message that if Scrooge continues on his path of greed, he will only die impoverished of all that is meaningful in life, rendering his efforts to escape poverty useless.

Ebenezer Scrooge is a man who is entrapped in the cruel chain reaction of fear and wealth. He attempts in vain to gain as much wealth as he can to escape his fear of being poor, only to suffer great losses and to be left with new fears and a different type of poverty. Scrooge is ignorant to the consequences of his lifestyle; he feels his fixation with wealth has led him to be safe from poverty, therefore he holds the misguided notion that he has succeeded in life. Yet as Scrooge's journey with the supernatural continues, he begins to see how his greed has ruined his moral character and has left him alone, unloved, and afraid for his future. Unless he opens his eyes to his wrongdoings and begins to repent, Scrooge will end up in the lonely grave, with only

his mistakes and misery to keep him company.

Works Cited

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