Calling him back from Layoff Analysis

Bob Hicok’s poem ‘Calling him back fro Layoff’ presents a contemporary theme on the predicament of modern life. It deals with the psychological fall-out of lay off during times of economic recession.

One of the most difficult aspects of work is not having it when you need it the most. The poem highlights the tension and anxiety faced not only by the laid off employee but also the helplessness and the heartache of the employer. The poem looks at human perspectives in the process of layoff.

The poem presents the awkward situation of an HR person calling an employee back to work. With the power to hire, fire and rehire, the thought process of the employer is poignantly brought out in the poem. An employer’s dilemmas along with the laid off employee’s hopes are effectively presented in the ‘run-on’ sentences. The employer calls a man to come back to work and his silent emotional moment follows the call. When the worker says hello, he too returns the greeting, but after the formal ‘How are you’ and the employee’s ‘Fine’ he does not know how to proceed. He imagines the laid off employee sitting on a couch surfing through TV ads, lost in his world of hopelessness and joblessness. Since he was at home, the employer finds in him a sediment of life, unlike some others who get so depressed and angry that they go out, get drunk and use unparliamentarily impolite words on others who are leading a normal life.

When the employer tells the laid off employee that he can come back to work, there is a pause, which makes the caller imagine him clearing his mouth or heaving a sigh of relief ; his words ‘How soon, thank you and Oh my God’ reflect the chain of emotions in the employee; the cry of relief drives through the ions of telephonic wires as an expression of gratitude to God. The relief is so much that the employee begins crying and the employer uses silence to convey that he understands. It is a confession of fear and poverty and makes the employer feel more awkward than any other naked moment in life.

The poem does not stop here; the caller goes out and with one hand in the bower of the other, starts thinking; on his one side, he can hear the song of joy of the laid off employee; on his other side, there are more laid off persons, staring at their phones, waiting for their turn to be called. While one employee who has been called back, celebrates his dinner with steak, the others have naked forks, with nothing to eat. The poem ends with this visual thought, which is touchingly human.

The poem ‘ Calling him back from layoff’ dramatizes a moment in the lives of two people dealing with the economic downturn; the narrative style of writing creates the imagery of a stream of thought , while presenting two people in a conversation that is packed with anxiety, tension, hopelessness and hope, helplessness while helping. On one side we can feel the sincere heart pain of the employer who cannot keep everyone on the payroll ; on the other side, we have workers waiting out there with hope.