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Bartleby the Scrivener

“Dollars damn me...” wrote Herman Melville in his now famous letter to Nathaniel Hawthorne (Marx 1700). The famous author of the great *White Whale* was struggling through the writing process and feeling the heavy strain of trying to write something that would sell. He goes on to write that “[w]hat I feel most moved to write...is banned, –it will not pay. Yet, altogether, write the *other* way I cannot” (Marx 1700). Melville had ideas and stories that he felt called to write, but in order to support himself he had to write books like *Typee*, which were best sellers and enabled him to continue his writing career. The tale of *Bartleby* is one that echoes the sentiment expressed by Melville in his letter to Hawthorne, with *Bartleby* coming to the place in his career when he might at last be “worn out and perish” (Marx 1700). However, *Bartleby* is not the only character that may echo the perceived attitudes of the author. All of the characters in Melville’s “*Bartleby, the Scrivener*” represent the different sides of the man himself, as well as the perspectives that he had on that of the lower class working man and on his own situation. Because he creates characters whom all occupy different positions within society, Melville is able to use “*Bartleby, the Scrivener*” to give voice to his own unique perspective on the capitalist system.

The first character to look at is not *Bartleby* himself, but rather the gracious lawyer for whom he works. Though he represents the perspectives of the upper class, he is also surprisingly sympathetic and accommodating to his eccentric staff. Not only does he have to deal with

Bartleby and his quirks, but he also manages the neurotic outbreaks of his other scriveners Turkey and Nippers. It is curious to see such an accepting attitude out of a man of his position, but the tolerance that the lawyer exhibits gives the impression that he has some understanding of life on the other side of the fence. Melville himself knew both success and failure, going from his novel *Typee*, which was a “literary sensation” to *Moby-Dick* and virtual obscurity at the end of his life (Cassill 1085). This understanding is perhaps what allows Melville to write such an unusual character in a story that otherwise seems like an indictment on capitalism. In her article about “Bartelby, the Scrivener,” author Naomi Reed touches on this fact and how it at first seems to preclude the use of Marxist theory to analyze Melville’s story. “[R]eadings of “Bartleby” as a parable of the dangers of capitalism hinge on a fundamental misreading of the text, and of the lawyer in particular, who cannot easily be put into the mold of a typical heartless capitalist” Reed writes, pointing out the need to look more closely at the character (248).

The lawyer’s point of view is important, if not because he is the narrator, but because he is so moderate while still treating his employees like commodities. He is used to the men under him doing their work without being terribly reliable, and he still expects that they will follow his orders because he is, simply put, their superior and has paid for their compliance. Because of this assumption, when Bartleby first refuses to review the copy work that he has completed, the lawyer cannot understand why. “I should have violently dismissed him from my premises,” he says to himself, “But as it was, I should have as soon thought of turning my pale plaster-of-paris bust of Cicero out of doors” (Melville 1092). This behavior persists, and even Turkey and Nippers condemn Bartleby’s refusals, easily falling in line with the status quo. “Nippers,” the lawyer asks, “what do *you* think of it? “I think I should kick him out of the office” Nippers replies (Melville 1093). The fact that the lawyer does not do just that is curious, and the

sympathy that he displays for Bartley's position is very uncharacteristic of someone of his station. This break of character shows how Melville's own perspective leaks through the cracks of his writing, empathizing with Bartleby as someone whom he has seen both great success and great hardship. Though he sits at the top of the proverbial pyramid, the lawyer too feels the pressure to conform and perform according to what society dictates, especially as an employer with misbehaving employees.

The two copyists Nippers and Turkey are the next to fall into the equation. They fit into the status quo of the lawyer's office with ease while still showing signs of humanity left in them. Both men alternate between utter neurosis and quiet productivity, struggling to continue on with their seemingly endless work. They are a means to an end for the lawyer, their lives and work a commodity for which he pays them. The moments of insanity that they experience seem to foreshadow a reaction not unlike that of Bartleby's. Melville himself experienced the same frustration with writing, writing to Hawthorne how "[in] a week or so, I got to New York, to bury myself in a third-story room, and work and slave on my "Whale" while it is driving thought the press. *That* is the only that I can finish it now" ⁱ(Marx 1700). They work because they must to sustain themselves within their capitalist society, but they are past the point of total compliance.

Describing Turkey to the reader, the lawyer presents him as "[during] the time before twelve o'clock, meridian...the quickest, steadiest creature...yet in the afternoon he was disposed, upon provocation, to be slightly rash with his tongue, in fact, insolent" (Melville 1087). The lawyer blames Turkey's change in temperament on his more advanced age, denying that there might be anything else the matter with his employee. His portrayal of Nippers is just as unflattering and similarly full of excuses. The man is portrayed to the reader as "the victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion. The ambition was evidenced by a certain impatience

of the duties of a mere copyist...[and] the indigestion seemed betokened in...irritability...unnecessarily malicious edictions...and especially by a continual discontent with the height of the table where he worked” (Melville 1089). Neither man seems to be content with where he has ended up in life. Both seem to be coming apart at the seams as time goes on, and they present an outwardly perfect image of writers reaching their respective breaking points. Melville’s own voiced frustrations to Hawthorne return to mind in light of these descriptions, and it is simple to see how one writer’s frustrations can become that of his characters. The lawyers’ copyists are nearing the point of rejecting the expectations that have been placed upon them, no longer finding that the value of their work to be worth the price with which society rewards them. It is then that dear Bartleby’s character comes into the picture.

The final step into revolt can be found in the preferences of one rundown copyist named Bartleby. When he arrives at the door of the lawyer, he appears barely alive, described as, “a motionless young man...[looking] pallidly neat, pitiably respectable...[and] incurably forlorn” (Melville 1090). He does his work more reliably than the neurotic Turkey or Nippers at first, performing exactly how his employer desires. However, that compliance does not last for very long. The longer he is a part of the story, the more Melville creates the illusion of Bartleby as the ghost of the man he used to be. Though his rebellions start out small, Bartleby soon completely disconnects from life, behaving more like an apparition living the echoes of his life than a real man. Bartleby, much like Melville, no longer feels obligated to do things that he does not prefer, like endless copying and reviewing of his work. He reaches the point where he “forsakes conventional modes because of an irresistible preoccupation with the most baffling philosophical questions” (Marx 1700). Melville does just that in his own writing career, forsaking the more

lucrative styles of writing in favor of the things that lay heavy on his mind, like the great white whale.

Leo Marx, in his review entitled *Melville's Parable of the Walls*, comes right out and says that "Bartleby's shift in attention is the symbolic equivalent of Melville's own shift of interest between *Typee* and *Moby Dick* (1700). Marx states many of the easily recognizable parallels to be found between the author and the character, despite the lack of a confession on Melville's part. Melville uses the character of Bartleby to tell the story of a man who has fallen out of circulation with the rest of the world. He feels alienated from his place in society, unable to continue on living as the source of a commodity of limited value that is dictated by those above him. Every time that Bartleby says that he would "prefer not to," he is not simply referring to his work; he is rejecting his own participation in the world. Bartleby detaches from the world and the demands of society, the give and take of the capitalist system no longer holding sway over him. Marx addresses Melville's side of that same dilemma, saying that "it is significant that Melville's story, read in this light, does not by any means proclaim the desirability of the change. It was written out of a time of deep hopelessness, and...it reflects Melville's doubts about the value of his recent work" (Marx 1700). It is likely that Melville wished to detach from the world much like Bartleby did in the end.

The cast of characters the Melville presents in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" all live in the same world as each other, but they see it in very different ways. The lawyer understands the system of capitalism that allows his business to run, exchanging wages in return for the commodity of his employees' writing. He is the man on top of the food chain in this story, the one with the most to lose and the one most invested in the system. He recognizes the humanity in the struggles of his various employees and feels the same pressure, but cannot give in to his

desire for freedom from expectations like they can. Turkey and Nippers both feel the strain of the constant give and take. They comply with what is expected of them and churn out copy after copy for the lawyer, but they cannot keep it together the whole time. Each man succumbs to the neurosis that comes from suppressing themselves to fit society's mold for a time, temporarily breaking free from their requirements. It is only Bartleby who is completely able to buck the system, but even he cannot do so while remaining alive.

Herman Melville was a writer of both great success and failure, much like his character Bartleby. He experienced life at the top of the social heap, as a man who perfectly fulfills what is desired of him by society to succeed. However, he also experienced life at the bottom, finding himself no longer willing to slave away doing what was expected of him when it became too onerous to stand. Each of the characters in Melville's story "Bartleby, the Scrivener" are at a different place in society, and they all provide different ways of looking at life. All of these perspectives provide an opportunity for the author to communicate the way life was for people at dissimilar levels of society. These perspectives are some that Melville himself knew through personal experience, and with the help of his unique platform and experiences, he uses the story of Bartleby to tell the some of the struggles and trials of life to be found within a capitalist society.

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ⁱ I find it ironic how I am a writer writing about writer's burn-out as I am experiencing that same burn-out myself. It is an incredibly frustrating thing.



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