

The relationship of bartleby and the narrator in bartleby, the scrivener

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Herman Melville's short story, "Bartleby, the Scrivener," has provided readers and critics with enough material to speculate upon Bartleby's condition and the message the writer intends to send through the peculiar character. Bartleby's unique character was so mysterious that it forced readers to look into the motives of the other major character, the narrator. Besides considering the personality and actions of the narrator, others have concentrated their attention on the relationship between the two and the significance of their interaction or lack thereof. For the contemporary reader, Bartleby's existence could have a double meaning: an alter ego for the alienated person who is living under circumstances completely different from what nature intended it to be and a choice of passive response to societies compulsiveness to adjust and submit to a strict simple but deceptive rules. After reading the short story the question we must all ask ourselves is does this story have a 'hero'? Who is it? How does this affect the story?

Although Bartleby and the narrator are seen as the main characters, Widmer does not identify a "hero" in the story between those two. In fact, it seems as though he paints the narrator to be more of an antagonist. He feels that the narrator "variously attempts to exorcise his wan demon of perverse will, his own walled-in humanity." I believe that it affects the story to the point of making the narrator seem less genuine during the times where he tries to help Bartleby. In the story, the other scriveners are very unreserved. So when Bartleby appears at the office and interviews for the job, the narrator thinks that Bartleby will tone the office down some because he was so different than the others. Everyone else worked in a separate location to the narrator, so Widmer believes that the narrator places Bartleby in his office so

that he can control him and make him do things the seasoned employees wouldn't.

The narrator introduces himself and sets the tone for his story in terms that present the reader with the setting that encompasses a claustrophobic world, his office: " ere introducing the scrivener, as he first appeared to me, it is fit I make some mention of myself, my employees, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings" (Melville, 2330). The repetition of a possessive pronoun announces that the narrator presents a world that he thinks is entirely under his control. Furthermore, he portrays himself as a person who finds a way to go through life avoiding complications, perfectly just into the rules and laws of society, and always choosing the easiest way out of any potential problem. He further describes his lack of ambition as a virtue that helped him keep safe and sound through the years and retainage of wisdom, speared of any turbulence.

The double meaning of the relationship between the narrator and Bartleby must be taken into consideration considering the environment the narrator describes he lived in for most of his adult life. His employees, the only people he introduces as his entourage, appear to be suffering from the alienating effects of their profession. The head of the office seems to be perfectly aware of their flaws and wise enough to make the best use of their hindered capabilities. On the other hand, he lives and works in the same circumstances therefore, making himself subject to similar alienation effects.

Sanford Pinsker, who wrote the article, 'Bartleby, the Scrivener': Language as Wall advances the theory that in order to understand the symbolism of Melville's short story, one must focus on the details regarding the narrator instead of trying to solve the enigma posed by the scrivener himself. Pinsker further considers the metaphor of the walls in the short story and their importance in defining human relationships or the lack thereof. The description of the chambers occupied by the law firm on Wall Street indicates the power effect of the walls on those who are surrounded by them. No one is spared by the look of walls, not even the head of the office: "owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second floor, the interval between this wall and mine not a little resembled a huge square cistern" (2331).

The atmosphere of the whole story is complete already within this passage since an utter impression of claustrophobia is set in place. Considering Melville's biography along with his travels and adventures during his young adult years, one could find a high degree of contrast between the wide and "uncivilized" basis he cruised through and the setting he creates for "Bartleby, the Scrivener." The people living in those chambers seem already dead, like ghost wandering around to torment others. Questions like: "What is the purpose of their existence?," "What is the meaning of life?," "Do these characters have any other life outside these walls?" arise when analyzing the circumstances Bartleby walked into at the law office. Melville's exploration into the limitations imposed by an artificial and apparently

absurd and purposeless life goes deeper into the depth of human mind and psyche.

The development of the narration gives the reader the possibility to make all kinds of speculations, thus bringing the story closer to being a mystery story. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock starts his analysis of the story with the consideration that it is indeed meant as a modern mystery short novel, pointing out the meaninglessness of some human actions: the conclusion or lack thereof of Bartleby's points to the unsettling realization that every letter is potentially a "dead letter"- that, as famously proposed by Jacques Derrida, a letter can always not arrive at its destination meaning can always go astray. If this is an inherent possibility of language, then "Bartleby" finally raises the question of what is meant to be.

Barley is frightening to the narrator because he highlights the meaninglessness of work, something the narrator believed in. Once a message is taken out of context, it may become useless for those who are trying to discover its meaning. In this case, one accepts Weinstock's proposal to consider "Bartleby, the Scrivener" a mystery story. His conclusion would be that not only phrases, but also human beings taken out of context are likely to become useless or, otherwise meaningless.

In closing, other well-known writers such as, David Shusterman agree that Herman Melville did not write the short story with a "hero" in mind. Shusterman feels like even though there is not hero identified, a character to take note of is the lawyer narrator. The narrator goes out of his way to

appear like the good guy but his intentions may not be so pure. He wants to be the hero but many believe he takes on a more antagonist role.

Works Cited

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