

Metaphor of blackness in american literature

[Literature](#), [American Literature](#)



American writers have expressed their political and social views through their writing by attempting to establish a voice separate from Britain's. Their fear of individual and national failure and their thirst for power consumes them and is evident in their writing. Washington Irving and Herman Melville involve the occupation of lawyers and Justices to bring in a patriotic element to influence residents of the young country as a way to share their concerns and inspire ambition. Their usage of metaphors and metonymy subtly convey a message of hope to white residents while, deflating the optimism of the soon to be freed slaves. This essay will prove that a critical reading of Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," and Irving's "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow" utilizes representations and depictions of the gothic, the portrayal of black characters and their isolation, and blackness suggests the preoccupations of the American writer.

Authors use gothic elements, metaphors and the imagination of narrators to shed light on issues they cannot regularly explain. Irving created the town of Sleepy Hollow for the purpose of his story. He names this town to mean a lethargic pit of emptiness to comment on the state of America at this time, following the Revolution. Sleepy Hollow is a town that possesses "a drowsy, dreamy influence seems to hang over the land, and to pervade the very atmosphere" (294). The metaphor of the town is Irving's literal wake up call to Americans to take action. The gloomy setting and ancient prophesy concerning the apparition of a Hessian trooper, surrounds the town and provides a gothic element, which are enhanced by the imagery illustrated by the narrator. This mysterious atmosphere is able to "lull one to repose" (293). The presence of apparitions, in the works of Irving and Melville, are

used to describe characters that cause a state of uneasiness to those they contact. Irving describes “ the apparition of a figure on horseback without the head. It is said by some to be the ghost of a Hessian trooper, whose head had been carried away by a cannon ball” (294). In this story, the apparition presents himself to Irving’s unlikely romantic hero, Icabod Crane, whom had “ hands that dangled a mile out of his sleeves... his whole frame most loosely hung together... a long snipe nose, so that it looked like a weathercock perched upon his spindle neck, to tell which way the wind blew” (295). Irving also utilizes the gothic theme of the multiple suitors vying for Katrina Van Tassel. Brom Bones, Icabod’s competition, received his nickname “ from his Herculean frame and great powers of limb” (303) and believed to be disguised as the Headless Horseman. Lastly, the gothic theme of parted lovers is demonstrated with “ Icabod being carried off by the galloping Hessian” (318). Irving brings together aspects of the gothic as a warning to America to rise up and take action or else their independence will be taken away.

In Melville’s text the narrator describes his first encounter with Bartleby as, “ a motionless young man one morning, stood upon my office threshold... I can see that figure now... it was Bartleby” (15). The narrator comments on the manner in which he worked as “ silently, palely and mechanically” (18) and denies his humanity by claiming him a “ strange creature” (169), “ had there been any thing ordinarily human about him” (25), “ apparition of Bartleby appeared” (86, 169). The lawyer’s eerie portrayal of Bartleby intensifies after Bartleby passively resists his requests and paints him a supernatural figure: “ Like a very ghost, agreeably to the laws of magical invocation, at the third

summons, he appeared at the entrance of his hermitage” (79). Both Bartleby and the Hessian disrupt the calm and significantly disturb the lives of those they come in contact with. Noting his prolonged encounters with Bartleby, the lawyer states, “ sometimes to be sure I could not, for the very soul of me, avoid falling into sudden spasmodic passions with him” (84). Icabod is shortly haunted when, “ His heart began to sink within him; he endeavored to resume his psalm tune, but his parched tongue clove to the roof of his mouth, and he could not utter a stave” (316), before disappearing.

Isolation is one of the central themes of “ Bartleby, the Scrivener,” and is highlighted by the motif of the wall. The office, in which the story is placed, is located in a chamber suite named, “ No. □ Wall-street” (5). Society and the narrator isolate Bartleby by enclosing him behind walls. The narrator does this by the putting up a “ high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight” (17) when he first joins the office staff. He establishes a dichotomous relationship with Bartleby to emphasize his superiority by physically putting up the wall. Bartleby is isolated by society when he is locked up in the alms-house and is “ standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall” (218). Melville further demonstrates the seclusion of Bartleby by having the narrator place him at a desk in front of the window with “ an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade” (5). Bartleby is denied all escape from his work with the view of the wall: “ I placed his desk close up to a small side-window in that part of the room, a window which...commanded at present no view at all” (17). The narrator refers to the wall as a “ dead-wall” (92, 126, 166) several times throughout the story. The trance, which

Bartleby appears to be in, while gazing at the wall, creates an alternate world of confinement consisting of the wall and him, which the narrator repeatedly refers to as his “hermitage” (28, 50, 51, 79, 107, 163, 166). Melville’s images of blackness surrounding the wall symbolize the class barrier and casts Bartleby as a black character. He is isolated in a similar way, as the blacks have been segregated.

The manner, in which, the narrator treats Bartleby can be paralleled to the way the newly abolished slaves were treated. The two characters clash because each possesses a personality on opposite ends of the spectrum and Melville juxtaposes them by associating Bartleby as “a man of preferences than assumptions” (147). The narrator tries “to reason with him” (35), and has Bartleby states “At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable” (110). This statement portrays Bartleby to be a man without reason. The sincerity of the narrator’s feeling towards Bartleby is questionable because of the words he has selected to describe these feelings. First, he states: “Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance” (53) and “I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way” (115). Repeatedly using the word “melancholy,” twice in 89 and 93 and once in 152, raises suspicion and leads one to question whether this is true emotion or simply the lawyer’s rhetoric. It is obvious that Bartleby is not understood by the narrator because of “a certain squeamishness of I know not what withheld me” (186) and the distance he immediately creates, writes Bartleby off. The narrator’s repulsion and irritation results from his Christian beliefs, “What I saw that morning persuaded me that the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable

disorder. I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach" (93). To him, Bartleby is not humanly equal to him in the same way blacks were viewed. Whites believed blacks were endowed with lower moral worth than them and it was this reason that slavery was able to resume for hundreds of years. Bartleby exercises choice throughout the story by his passive resistance. He chooses to be stationary and not be moved around by the system or his employer, " I like to be stationary" (209). This also likens Bartleby to the newly abolished slaves because after years of being denied choice and sold from one owner to another, they too would prefer to exercise choice and remain stationary.

The images of blackness and black characters in Sleepy Hollow provide alternate meanings and display the preoccupations of American writers. Irving employs images of blackness to reveal the apparition of the Headless Horseman stating, " he appeared to be a horseman of large dimensions, and mounted on a black horse of powerful frame" (316). This image is associated to power and steed, however, the black characters Irving describes lack both qualities. He sarcastically refers to the presence of the negro messenger as feeling " full of importance and hurry of his mission" (306). To Icabod the messenger's pride is laughable. He cannot fathom what the messenger has to be proud of. The messenger has been afforded the privilege to leave his master's ground and was provided a mode of transportation when he could have been made to walk. Icabod also insults his level of education by noting his " effort at fine language, which a negro is apt to display on petty embassies of the kind" (306). Irving's portrayal of blacks is an example of the preoccupations with race that exist within the white imagination.

The images and metaphors in “ Sleepy Hollow” and “ Bartleby, the Scrivener” allow for multiple interpretations. Perhaps the most prevalent is the message that Irving and Melville wish to convey to their American readers. Despite being written 30 years apart, they still deem a lawyer one of the most formidable professions a man can have. At the end of “ Sleepy Hollow,” Icabod is rumoured to me to have run off and “ kept school and studied law at the same time, had been admitted to the bar” (319). The narrator of Melville’s story is employed as a lawyer. The presence of law and politicians in these stories reinforce the messages of American patriotism and democracy.