

Displacement by society



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“ Strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones, I saw the wasted Bartleby. I felt his hand, when a tingling shiver ran up my arm and down my spine to my feet” (1173). Bartleby the Scrivener died of sadness, feeling trapped and utterly without place in the mechanized society that had sprouted around him. He fell victim to his own desire to resist the mindless adaptation that characters like the narrator achieved so seamlessly. Bartleby’s death plainly points to Melville’s disgruntled view of the modern world; a world where strength comes from weakness and pliability, and where the naturally weak overpower the strong. To define Bartleby the Scrivener in such simple terms, however, is to ignore some important, specific themes that Melville cleverly allegorizes with the characters in the story. To Melville, the modern authoritarian society so minutely divides a person’s responsibilities, it reduces the scope of his ability to interact with himself, nature, and his community. This belief closely follows that of Ralph Waldo Emerson, who judged modern mechanized society to be the downfall of humanity because it rendered individuals numb to the range of capabilities that they are naturally endowed with. Melville’s characters in Bartleby, the Scrivener are portrayed as “ half-men” who are victims of a society which stifles their natural ability to feel and act according to their romantic role as an individual in society. American romantics have a unique view of the role of the individual in society. Understanding this role is crucial to understanding the reasons for the tragic failure of romantic values in Bartleby, the Scrivener. To a romantic, the wellbeing of the individual is paramount to the quality of the society they build. Emerson best details the relationship between the individual and society in *The American Scholar*. He points out that nature

and simplicity are more authentic than the hierarchy and divisions of modern society. Divisions and subdivisions of society, caused in part, by the mechanization of industry and commerce, alienate people from the potential richness of the full range of emotions, experiences, and senses that everyone is capable of. Each man is forced to reduce himself to a single function, devoting all of his energy to that one task. He relies on the rest of society to provide for him the rest of the necessities and luxuries of life in return for his hard earned money. As a result, people become absorbed in the plodding of daily life, unable to see beyond their immediate time and place. The farmer “ sees his bushel and his cart, and nothing beyond” (842). The tradesman “ scarcely ever gives an Idea worth to his work, but is ridden by the routine of his craft, and the soul is subject to dollars” (842). With these criticisms of modern society, Emerson implies that part of returning to simplicity, or at least the first step towards it, is returning to the self. Only then can the spiritual dialogue between man and nature begin. And as a result of this closeness with nature, the “ self” is improved, thus improving society as a whole. Emerson describes society as “ undefinable” because the souls of its individuals have been replaced with a single plodding purpose: “ this original unit, this fountain of power, has been so distributed to multitudes, so minutely subdivided and peddled out, that it is spilled into drops, and cannot be gathered” (842). A society full of people who experience life to its fullest, by dividing their own energies to a balanced mix of survival, reflection and contemplation, and practicing a trade or job, will form for its self a communal characteristic. The contentment and self reliance of each of its individuals will allow them to pursue, among other things, a communal closeness to ensure security and growth. A society full of

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such individuals is naturally better than one whose members are consumed with themselves and their small daily tasks. The narrator in *Bartleby, the Scrivener* seems perfectly adapted to life in an authoritarian world. He is committed only to safety and security. He “has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best,” and is therefore an “eminently safe man” (1149). His seemingly natural harmony with the world around him implies that he is not a romantic. But the narrator possesses some romantic traits that cannot be ignored. He is sensible, sympathetic, and compassionate, and resolves to help Bartleby take decisive action in his life: “his soul I could not reach . . . but if in any other way I could assist him, I would be happy to do so. Moreover, if, after reaching home, he found himself at any time in want of aid, a letter from him would be sure of a reply” (1161). Considering the narrator’s unadventurous, uncommitted lifestyle, this kind of compassion is surprising. More surprising, however, is the peculiar bond he feels with the confoundingly bizarre Bartleby. After realizing that Bartleby had been making his home at the office, “the bond of common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam” (1160). The fact that the narrator feels he and Bartleby are “sons of Adam” reveals not only that he has a deep well of compassion upon which he draws for Bartleby, but also that the connection between these seemingly polar opposite people runs deeper than both Bartleby and the narrator would probably like to admit. Bartleby and the narrator are two “half-men” who, together, should make a complete man. The narrator is flexible and adaptable, is well suited to his environment, and in touch with the intricacies of his society and his duty. Although he is hardly a dynamic person, he represents the lowest common

denominator necessary to survive the modern society Melville depicts. Romantics of the 19th century probably did not praise men for their ability to adapt and find safety and security at all costs. But the ability to survive without imposing authoritarian values upon other people is certainly a romantic trait; one that the narrator possesses. He is, of course, an authority figure, but one of his perceived “weaknesses.” The inability to stand up to Bartleby’s passive resistance, is actually a respectable trait that points to a compassionate, romantic disposition. Bartleby lacks everything the narrator possesses, and is therefore doomed to isolation. Unlike the narrator, however, Bartleby acts from his heart. Bartleby is utterly isolated because he is guided by his own emotions, considering only himself in all matters. Even his famous line, “I would prefer not to,” implies that Bartleby, rather than objecting out of logical or ethical disagreement, simply doesn’t feel like it. This loyalty to his own heart is his defining romantic value, one that the narrator betrays by living to please others. Thus, both the narrator and Bartleby possess the necessary romantic traits that, if fused, might make a complete person who represents the kind of dynamic and capable person romantics idealize. But in the process of dividing humanity into its constituent parts, the authoritarian society has stripped from each of these men a vital part of their being that forces them into an unnatural state of humanity, which dooms them to failure even when in the presence of their complementing half. Bartleby’s resolve to obey his feelings fails to bring about any satisfaction or happiness because nothing in life excites him; he is seemingly incapable of pleasure. As a result, Bartleby wafts about the office devoid of life. Bartleby is “Pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn, dimly calm, cadaverous,” and “like a very ghost, agreeably to the <https://assignbuster.com/displacement-by-society/>

laws of magical invocation, appears at the entrance of his hermitage” (1153, 1154, 1158, 1159). Bartleby, because he finds no connection with his environment, lives in a vividly unnatural state of near-death. Likewise, the narrator fails to accomplish the one thing that ever aroused passion in him: helping Bartleby. So accustomed to a life avoiding controversy for the sake of his own ease, he finds himself unable to help even one man. With the final quote of the story “ Ah, Bartleby. Ah, humanity!” the narrator realizes that he is neither capable of helping Bartleby, nor equipped to alter the human condition. Although few expect one person to alter the human condition, Emerson’s, and presumably Melville’s notion of the role of the individual in society suggests “ complete” individuals who exist in their natural state with natural surroundings have a profound effect on the state of humanity. To a romantic, individuals should be compassionate, spiritual, and capable to a degree that they need only exist to improve the society around them² As a man who is in command of only the faculties necessary to survive a safe, easy life, the narrator fails to improve the life of a single other man because he too exists in an unnatural state of isolation. Though he survives in his world, he is an insignificant part of a vast machine for which he completes mundane tasks. In this sense he is isolated from himself, and therefore isolated from an understanding of his place in the world. More specifically, the narrator’s plodding, limited life has rendered him incapable of understanding anything irrational. Richard H. Fogle, author of a brief analysis titled simply, “ Bartleby,” points out that “ Bartleby’s irrationalism is inscrutable; it is the element of mystery in the world” that the narrator is unable to comprehend (24). This causes in the narrator a “ growing sense of fear and anxiety” (24), which points to the narrators inability to understand

anything that strays from the linear, the orderly, and conformity. Even Melville's description of the environment around him serves to illustrate the narrator's limited view of the world. It appears to him consistently blocked by walls that he feels strangely comfortable with, and in which he even finds "lurking beauty" (1149). These walls shield him from the expansive truth that lies waiting to be discovered. The bleak, cold, gray structures of Wall street displace nature, and provide for the narrator an environment that is sufficient only because he knows nothing of what lies beyond it. Though a certain degree of innocence is a respectable romantic trait, ignorance is not. The narrator's ignorance is the defining factor of his unnatural state of existence. Turkey and Nippers serve as more obvious and comical representatives of divided humanity and unnatural existence. Like the narrator and Bartleby their eccentricities complement each other. Turkey, who is old and fading in usefulness, works calmly and efficiently until noon, when he promptly gets drunk and storms about his space in a rage. Young Nippers is "the victim of two evil powers-ambition and indigestion" (1150). Throughout the morning his indigestion makes him irritable and incapable of working efficiently, until noon, when he settles down and produces work on par with Turkey when he is sober. Thus the two "relieved each other like guards, [which was] a good natural arrangement, under the circumstances" (1152). Together, the two make a "good natural arrangement," but alone, they exist as half-men in an utterly unnatural state. Turkey spends half of his day, and therefore half of his life, drunk and crazy. Nippers spends an equal amount of time grinding his teeth and rearranging his desk in frustration caused by indigestion. But unlike the relationship between Bartleby and the narrator, Turkey and Nippers actually function properly once they are both

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viewed as a single person. They complement each other because, as Charles G. Hoffman points out in a review of the story, “ they do their duty in the prescribed way at all times, and their irrational behavior follows a pattern that becomes a part of regularity and order rather than an uncontrolled element outside” (24)2EContrasting the relationship between Turkey and Nippers, and Bartleby and the narrator, an underlying theme emerges. The authoritarian world in which these characters live demands that individuals be useful to it. Although they represent an efficient duo, each taking over when the other one goes mad, they are useful to society only because they have been reduced to miserable drones that hardly represent the full range of humanity. The narrator and Bartleby, however, are more dynamic individuals whose character runs far deeper. Each possesses romantic characteristics that seem compatible with each other. In a world that supports romantic values, the narrator and Bartleby would naturally help solve each other’s problems. Bartleby’s inexplicable irrationality and self-motivated actions (or rather, inaction) would shed light on a new aspect of humanity that the narrator had previously avoided or been sheltered from. The narrator’s natural “ attraction” to Bartleby’s peculiarities would foster an incurable curiosity about a man who resisted every aspect of modern life. The narrator notices the attraction in himself, and is drawn to his “ pallid haughtiness,” which “ positively awed me into my tame compliance with his eccentricities” (1161). Through understanding, the narrator would be more motivated to help Bartleby, and more equipped to do so as well, giving the narrator, presumably for the first time, a sense of accomplishment. In turn, Bartleby would be saved from his own misery, having learned the importance of adapting to survive, perhaps even finding pleasure in some

things. Melville, however, makes it clear that such a scenario is impossible. Romantic values are doomed in a world where people are only worth what they produce for it. No matter how “compatible” the Narrator and Bartleby are, their romantic tendencies are of no use to their society. Thus combining the two to create a “whole” man is futile and doomed to failure, a fact that Melville stresses through the narrator’s reaction to Bartleby’s homelessness. Even at his most compassionate moment, when he feels that bond of commonality, he is overwrought with a feeling of disgust by Bartleby’s lifestyle: “My first emotions had been those of pure melancholy and sincerest pity; but just in proportion as the forlornness of Bartleby grew and grew to my imagination, did that same melancholy merge into fear, that pity into repulsion” (1161). The mechanization of society and the trend towards authoritarianism are incompatible with romantic values because they split the role of the individual in society into two: one to make decisions, and one to follow them. The one who makes decisions must take into consideration the profound influence he may have on the lives of his subordinates. Placing the fate of many into the hands of an individual would not happen in Melville’s or Emerson’s ideal society, and is indeed impossible for a man with romantic qualities. The narrator is such a man, and is therefore a poor authority figure. He fumbles over decisions, and seems to have little or no influence on the people around him, namely Bartleby. Subordinates in such a society are masters of only one task, are therefore consumed with such limited sphere of reality, they are no longer in command of their every faculty. Turkey and Nippers, who lose control of nearly all their faculties for half the day, exemplify this perfectly. Somewhere in the middle, however, lies Bartleby. He has no authority, yet resists subordination. Thus, he and the

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narrator are two halves of a “complete” man who, because neither fits into the divisions prescribed by society, struggle with their relationship. This bleak world that Melville renders exemplifies his, Emerson’s, and other romantics’ fears of society’s trend towards endless divisions. Readers may be inclined to read Bartleby as a romantic character who falls victim to a society that rejects his values. But Bartleby does not represent a complete portrait of a romantic individual. He is the product of the fission of humanity caused by the modern, mechanized, authoritarian society that has divided his soul and parceled it out to those around him. Works Cited Fogle, Richard H. “Bartleby.” *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Casebook for Research*. Ed., Stanley Schatt. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1972. Hoffman, Charles G. “The Shorter Fiction of Herman Melville.” *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Casebook for Research*. Ed., Stanley Schatt. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1972. Melville, Herman. “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” *Anthology of American Literature*. 7th edition, Volume 1. Ed., George McMichael. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2000.