

The tragedy of a man

Literature



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The “ apparition” of Bartleby has confounded many wise men, scholars, critics and the like. The strange, almost inhuman way Bartleby resisted his employer and all forms of contact seemed supernatural—“ Poe-ish”, as some would say (Reed 1). Though in recent times, the story of Bartleby has been used as an allusion of the Communist struggle against the capitalist system.

Thus, they explained that Bartleby’s refusal to engage in the regular capitalist work is clearly an act of defiance against the system; and the historical vagueness and background surrounding the story accentuates this implied class struggle.

The tragedy of it all, in the end, centers on the limited awareness of the narrator. His scrivener was not the originator of his tragedies; it was his humanity, and fatal defects that could not save his copyist from certain doom. His lack of insight into the depths of the human psyche and his consequent understanding of its workings rendered him unable to understand and aid his comrade. He was only an ordinary lawyer caught in circumstances he could not understand; though had he the sufficient expertise, the answer would have been simple as to surprise him.

Bartleby, if he was anything, was angry. No emotion could have driven him so potently as to his last contemptuous act upon himself and the world. Forsuicideis often thought of as some great act of despair or utter grief that overpowers the individual and inspire him to “ escape”. It is also an act of great contempt that is needed to give a man the strength to destroy himself completely and blind him to all the protestations of his body.

Thus, it was this rage that possessed Bartleby. The narrator was too struck by the pitiable, forlorn countenance as well as quiet insolence of his scrivener to discover the fire blazing from within. In all fairness to him, he was a well-balanced man—as he readily admitted—free from the mad fits and temperaments that has afflicted his scriveners. He could not therefore have guessed Bartleby as anything else, as he assumed that the man was well-rounded impersonality.

The woes of this misunderstood individual continues on, as Marxists take the tale hostage and use it as a weapon of their own. Bartleby becomes a tool of their hatred, and example of a social revolution. In this essay, then, it is hoped to wrest it back to the individual perspective and back to the man that is Bartleby. To accomplish this, one need glimpse at the perspectives of the Marxists and one divorced from the Communist context; from here it is hoped that the Marxist logic can be successfully deconstructed.

This paper will seek to redeem the soul of the story as well as the character immortalized in its pages. Citizen Bartleby Bartleby, the Scrivener's unique "Marxist" quality—its ability to identify with the class struggle and the woes of the capitalist system—are inevitably "pulled out" by two critics, Barbara Foley and Naomi Reed, by the use of differing perspectives. Foley accomplished this by de-focusing from the individual and giving more emphasis on the style used in the story and how it relates to historical events of that time.

Thus, the mention of John Jacob Astor and Trinity Church, which coincidentally owned huge properties across the New York area where the story's office was located, become representations of the oppressive land

monopolies (Foley 7-10). The narrator's reducing his staff into "idiosyncracies" and an ideology of "patronage" (Foley 6) is representative of an unequal wage slavery; and the ambiguity of the date by which the story probably took place (through careful analysis it was found that there were too many inconsistencies in the dates), may have been intentional as to "underplay" the Astor Strike of 1849 (Foley 13-16).

The last was re-emphasized with telling effect—by citing Melville's "disillusionment" of the society of the elite and the similarities of another Melville work, "The Two Temples". Naomi Reed, meanwhile, while centering on Bartleby the apparition and the "gentlemanly cadaver", relates him as such, by way of substance, to the commodity discussed by Marx in Capital. Bartleby is both of two forms: the ghost and the figure between life and death; comparably, a commodity is both physical and non-physical, for it has non-material value (Reed 6-9).

His insistent defiance on basic work, as well as other labors, is in fact a refusal to partake in exchange—the ideology behind his work (creating a perfect copy of the document) is that a copy may accurately portray an original document; in exchange terms, a value of one object may be substantially equaled by another. The scrivener's act of refusing to vouch for the copy would be parallel to the rejection of the accuracy of exchange. Bartleby then represents Marx's commodity alienating itself from the market forces (Reed 9-12). These two concepts do hold ground, in relating the individual to his environment.

Having admitted to this, a third, more personal approach is to be taken: the tragedy of Bartleby's anger and passive aggressive tendency. Turkey and
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Nippers Prior to introducing Bartleby, the narrator first gives us a glimpse of his two other scriveners: Turkey was an old man, of almost the same age as his employer, while Nippers was twenty-five. Of the former, it is narrated that after twelve o'clock, this legal copyist suddenly manifests discomfort throughout the day, carelessly spilling inkblots or bursting upon inanimate objects with fiery zeal with little provocation.

The employer hinted that this was due to old age. Indeed, fatigue and lack of rest would be enough to wear down the propriety of even the sternest of men, more so with old ones. For his part, Turkey would not, out of pride and the thought of wages being cut in half, do the sensible thing and stop work after twelve o'clock. Nippers, on the other hand, is most irritated when he is brimming with energy. This is attributed to his youth; though the narrator would much rather call it "ambition and indigestion".

He is impatient, rash and impetuous and would rather that the time pass and be done with his being a scrivener, as well as to finish his law studies. This here-and-now obsession manifests itself in his table, which probably symbolizes a hindrance to his objective. This impatience gradually dies down after lunch, as impetuosity is readily cured and becalmed by food. At the sight of his two scriveners' open expressions of anger, the lawyer must not have then detected the same in Bartleby. Indeed, he was looking for a more-balanced individual, and thought that he found it in the man.

He therefore was not properly warned to the dangerous patterns within Bartleby's character. Prefer Not To The employer relates how he was thunderstruck the first time he heard of Bartleby's quiet refusal. It was peculiarly odd, however, because there seemed to be no reason for this

reluctance—he didn't volunteer anything; he was ever quiet at his post, answering only when spoken to. He was therefore frustrated with what would seem as apparent insolence. Bartleby's answer " I would prefer not to" is a classic passive aggressive response.

The words " not to" are indeed an act of defiance and anger, though it could not be particularly directed anywhere. It was couched in the words " would prefer" because among passive aggressives, fear is commingled with anger. He has a fear of direct confrontation, and readily believes his being weaker to those around him. To say a " yes" or " no" would already be such an example of confrontation. Recognizing the " superiority" of would-be oppressors, he will express his anger, but try to make it as respectful a comment as possible.

To a fairly balanced man like the employer, this self-contradiction is absurd and utterly unreasonable; that is what makes it offensive. To a passive aggressive, however, it would be unreasonable to reveal a grievance. There are a myriad of reasons for this, but chief of them is the fear of rejection and condemnation as well as a need to retain some power against his oppressor. Revealing his weakness would strip him of any control or power over the object of his contempt, and make him susceptible to denunciation.

His silence then was due to fear for himself. It wasn't so much that he didn't want to say, he just couldn't. The employer could also have detected something dangerously amiss in Bartleby's refusal to do anything, except copy. He was clearly caught in some internal agony as to render him incapable of even the most mundane of tasks. He clearly needed help, and

the lawyer could only ill-afford to prove it. Infernal Solitude His employer was filled with great pity the minute he found out that Bartleby was living alone.

The latter did not socialize, knew no one, and generally kept to himself, using the office as a refuge. The narrator believes this as the source of the scrivener's misery and in many chances as possible sought to connect to him. Tragically, however, Bartleby was trapped in a state of "forced solitude"—while he might believe his state deplorable (though we could only assume), he is nevertheless prevented by anger and fear from reaching out, and this paralysis and stasis aggravates his misery. Bartleby did not loathe company; in his small way, he sought it.

Through his dealing with the company errand boy, Ginger Nut, and that one time when he looked his employer square in the eye and said "Can't you see it for yourself?"—the passive aggressive needs understanding, though he will offer no aid. The employer, stumbling through ways to help him, merely continues to frustrate his scrivener. Eventually the internal agony had debilitated Bartleby fully. Even copying had become a burden that he would not bear. The lawyer was constantly apprehensive that he would be abandoning Bartleby if he did anything that was not to ensure his safety.

He would have been right in assuming that his scrivener would have felt betrayed, for passive aggressives are generally resigned to their misery and see it as normal routine, and to those that they have stuck to with forlorn hope, failure would only accentuate the deathly gloom. His employer felt the barb of this hurt when Bartleby talked to him in jail. His statement then, and his subsequent refusal to eat can only be construed as part of his

contemptuous act against self and those he feels has wronged him.

Conclusion: Redemption

The significant sequel of the Dead Letters serves as the crossroads by which Bartleby's plight is fully understood. The employer later lamented of his finding the significant cause of Bartleby's desolation: he had worked as a clerk making letters for relatives of the departed. The thought of constantly generating correspondence to those who have recently lost probably destroyed him as a person. It was not only the act of breaking hearts; it seemed as if acting as accomplice to murder. This soon developed to a form of self-loathing, and the genesis of the tragedy of Bartleby.

There are two ways to interpret this: The question that was unveiled in the third perspective was the source of Bartleby's anger. Throughout we have learned that it was generated towards self and collaterally to others. Humanity should be briefly expounded as centered on the act of life. The very nature of a human being is to act to preserve life: eating, sleeping and even social interaction. The task of the Dead Letters was associated with the negation of life. Death. An unnatural and inhuman task, however mundane, will gradually wear down an individual.

Bartleby became a specter of Death, opposed to life, and therefore opposed to the world, and to society. He was reluctantly opposed, as by nature he was inclined to life. He felt this opposition unconsciously, and felt that all anger is directed against him. Passive aggressives have a source of hatred before the self. As a human being, Bartleby was inclined towards life, and was thus opposed to the Dead Letters system from the beginning. Gradually,

his resentment went inward, as he needed the wage and could not conveniently express his anger.

He became the figure of rebellion of the individual against the dehumanizing elements of his system as well as prevalent social forces. Reed had a point when she said that this was an act of rebellion against the system. She was, however, wrong in the sense that Bartleby is not a commodity; to admit to this truth would assume that the scrivener is equal to the commodity, comparable to the inanimate object of Marx's work. Using her concept, this is an act of equality that cannot be vouchsafed. There is nothing dehumanizing about circulation, and exchange.

The practice of work was not a product of capitalism, but social interaction. Bartleby was merely opposed to the inhumanity of the system, which he was thrust into. He therefore could not trust it, and would not trust it. Having experienced the unnatural task in the Dead Letters office, those that are detached from personal living though not overtly or even covertly opposed to life, would seem the same. This then would explain the scrivener's insistence of detachment of his private and public life.

The Marxist analysts say that the subtitle "A Story of Wall Street" precludes the social forces that are implied within Bartleby. It must not, however, be forgotten that this is a story about "Bartleby, the Scrivener", about an individual finding himself before the deathly coldness of Wall Street. He is the individual in the center of his environment. To belittle him, as Foley would do in her analysis, would again dehumanize him. To make him a slave to social forces, and the context of labor and the collective, would be like the lawyer who could not see the man crying out from within.

Maybe, he had an indication of his desolation, but trapped within institutions as cold as the buildings that house it, he had not the knowledge to reach out to him. The lack of scenery around the office windows may agreeably be an allegory to his blindness. His omission of going to church may have become a defect, as he was faced with humanity, and the sermons could at least have taught him how to act before it. The scrivener could not be saved within the pages of the story. The soul of his being, however, has been snatched from the perils that haunted his life.

It is hoped that in this simple gesture of understanding, Bartleby may find in death what he could not redeem in life: humanity. BIBLIOGRAPHY WORKS CITED Foley, Barbara. "From Wall Street to Astor Place: Historicizing Bartleby". *American Literature* 72. 1 (2000): n. p. Reed, Naomi. "The Specter of Wall Street: Bartleby and the Language of Commodities". *American Literature* 76. 4 (2004): n. p. REFERENCES Melville, Herman. "Bartleby, the Scrivener". *The Story and Its Writer: An Introduction to Short Fiction*. Fifth Edition. Ed. Anne Charters. Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999. 984-1010.