

A matter of perspective context capitalism and the wall street ethic in bartleby ...

[Sociology](#), [Communication](#)



The Scrivener'

Perhaps the most sophisticated aspect of Melville's story is in how effectively he lures the reader into focusing on the character of Bartleby. The scrivener's inscrutability is oddly compelling and invites one to try and "understand" Bartleby, to fashion a diagnosis, even imagine a treatment or cure. But the story is about perspective itself, the perspective of the lawyer, who can only assess and try to make sense of his enigmatic clerk within the confines of his own singular world view. True, his is the ethic of Wall Street and the pragmatic rationalism that defines the class of people who exist within that world and who embody its values. Yet it is inaccurate to assert that, as a member of that society, he is unable to love his neighbor as himself. It is perhaps more to the point to argue that he comes to feel compassion for Bartleby as far as he is able, though the care he shows for his clerk is self-congratulatory, as though the lawyer expects to earn some reward or material gain for his concern. Perspective determines the lawyer's view of Bartleby's odd behavior and shapes his response.

One cannot help but feel amused at the lawyer's discomfiture. We recognize that his pleading and his self-righteous protestations are impotent because they are out of context, illustrative of a man confronted by something completely outside the realm of his experience.

He imagines that he can reach Bartleby by addressing him as an equal, by trying to make him see sense. Having been "touched and disconcerted" by Bartleby, the lawyer decides he will try and reason with him rather than

allowing himself to fly into a rage at this willful display of disobedience (Melville 15). The lawyer's reaction is understandable and correct, even moral taken within the context of his persona and his understanding of the world. He is materialistic, even shallow, but we cannot consider him a "bad" man.

The lawyer believes that he is acting out of compassion and forbearance, as he understands these concepts, but he does not grow through his experience with Bartleby. Todd F. Davis explains that the lawyer cannot do otherwise than interject his own analysis. He cannot help interpreting Bartleby, having no visible, outward indication of some identifiable malady. Davis asserts that the lawyer's response is to declare Bartleby as being abnormal, clearly outside the range of human behavior (Davis 188). This is an initial reaction, an assumption the lawyer jumps to almost immediately so that he is able to deal with Bartleby on his own terms. Melville uses the phrase "ordinarily human," indicating that the lawyer has a distinct predisposition as to what constitutes an ordinary human being (Melville 14). Bartleby's puzzling inaction, his refusal to respond other than to voice the curtest possible denials, or to emote in any recognizable way is, for the lawyer, decidedly "unhuman."

Unable to understand or explain his employee, the lawyer must consign Bartleby to a status that requires no explanation. If he is not "ordinary," then he must be "extraordinary," a term that presumes that an in-depth explanation would be meaningless and, as such, is unnecessary. And as a man of logic and reason, he has no real interest in delving into the realm of

the intangible or mysterious. He is involved with the day-to-day concerns of his profession, of official documents and the machinations of legal proceedings. The narrator exhibits “no interest, or, at the least, no ambition in practicing law that demands of him thoughts of ‘higher’ things” (Davis 184). Matters of conscience are alien to him, thus, he is at odds with morally complex issues. The narrator’s self-characterization tells us that this is not an individual animated by generosity of spirit because there is nothing familiar about it and there certainly is no material gain involved.

The lawyer’s Wall Street-influenced value system is something he can never get past. It’s a mark of the story’s timelessness that the question of values should be relevant in our own time, which has seen economic upheaval, corporate malfeasance and, more recently, massive protests focused on Wall Street. One of the narrator’s most self-serving and cold-blooded statements, and a clear indication of the ethic that guides his view of Bartleby, comes early in the story. “He is useful to me,” the lawyer declares, concluding that by accommodating him and showing restraint it will gain him a “sweet morsel” for his conscience” (Melville 18). It is as though he has confused spiritual and material gain. In one breath he can imagine Bartleby still being of use to him, while in the next he practically gloats over the fact that helping Bartleby will act as a salve for his conscience.

But if Bartleby is causing the lawyer so much consternation and forcing him to rationalize and self-justify, the strange clerk must be causing some change in the lawyer’s bottom-line orientation. In his 1987 essay “Up Wall Street Toward Broadway: The Narrator’s Pilgrimage in Melville’s ‘Bartleby

the Scrivener,”” Graham Nicol Forst claims that Bartleby is a potential agent of change for the narrator, confronting him with an opportunity for evolution and a new birth of self-awareness. “ Bartleby’s mission is divine: to awaken the narrator to his responsibility with regards to the keeping of his brother” (Forst 266). There is a belief that God speaks to man through his conscience, if only man will listen. If that is true, then we must admit that the lawyer is deaf to such divine entreaties. It is not that he will not listen to this inner voice; he simply cannot hear. Bartleby himself does not embody redemptive powers or have the ability to help the Wall Street lawyer reclaim his soul. Bartleby functions as a moral reflector, an intractable object not imbued with self-conscious, persuasive power of his own with which to reach the lawyer. Bartleby is like a provocative objet d’art that defies interpretation; the object simply elicits a subjective response.

After Bartleby is finally led away, it seems as though he has affected his former employer after all. The lawyer, perhaps out of some latent though sincere feeling of guilt, takes an interest in Bartleby after he is locked away in the Tombs. He even goes so far as to make special arrangements for Bartleby’s meals, though Bartleby once again demurs. In the sequel, in which we learn something of Bartleby’s past, the lawyer returns to form. His is no elegiac reverie, no wistful remembrance, but a characteristic attempt to order his own world by erecting a psychological interpretation in terms of Bartleby’s past life. He muses about the long hours Bartleby spent in the dead letter office and the apparently dulling, mind-numbing effect that experience had on his soul, which he manifested every time the lawyer

asked him to perform a task that fell within the responsibilities of his position. The narrator does not even entertain alternate possibilities, he simply needs to apply what to him seems a rational construction to a strange and unsettling episode. As Robert Weisbuch explains in *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age of Emerson*, the lawyer “investigates Bartleby but refuses authentic emotional commitment in so doing” (Weisbuch 44).

It is the lawyer’s rational mind and his smug belief in the inviolability of the mid-19th century Capitalist system that is unsettled. The narrator lets us know early in the story where his loyalties lie, invoking as he does John Jacob Astor, one of the paladins of America’s financial world, much as a 21st century businessman might speak of Warren Buffett. Into this capitalistic landscape comes Bartleby, uttering his laconic phrase in direct contravention of the dogma of productivity and the sanctity of the division of labor. The initial impression is that the lawyer is being defied but, in a larger sense, it is Capitalism itself that is challenged. Bartleby does not spout radical slogans or threaten violence, he simply refuses to comply. The condemnation of capitalistic thought is that the lawyer is at a complete loss as to how to cope with a straightforward, human response. Had this been the scenario, the lawyer may have been “spared” a painful personal reassessment.

One imagines that if Bartleby had appeared to the lawyer as a firebrand, he might actually have been easier to deal with since he would have used language and concepts that his employer could have recognized. But, as a good and faithful capitalist, the narrator reacts as he has been conditioned

to, putting before us his own version of the facts and his personal interpretation of Bartleby based on his Wall Street-centered perspective. Bartleby is a shock to his capitalist sensibilities, but the narrator remains essentially faithful to his view of the world and his belief in the order that capitalism endows.

References

Davis, Todd. "The Narrator's Dilemma in 'Bartleby the Scrivener: The Excellently Illustrated

Re-statement of a Problem." *Studies in Short Fiction* 34, 1997, 183-192. Print.

Forst, Graham Nicol. "Up Wall Street Towards Broadway: The Narrator's Pilgrimage in

Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener.'" *Studies in Short Fiction* 24, 1987, 263-70. Print.

Melville, Herman. *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Sioux Falls, SD: NuVision Publications, LLC, 2010.

Print.

Weisbuch, Robert. *Atlantic Double-Cross: American Literature and British Influence in the Age*

of Emerson. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1986. Print.