

Bartleby the scrivener essay

Business



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In Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the lawyer—who also functions as a narrator—experiences internal struggle between religious morals and the modern capitalism ideas, but eventually chooses capitalism ideas over religious morals. Bartleby's peculiar actions of refusing to do every activity, causes the narrator to view him as a mere object and pity him. The lawyer recalls the Bible and approaches Bartleby to offer him help in order to appease his own guilt of looking down on him.

Through helping Bartleby, the lawyer is satisfied of himself of being a pious man. However, once he finds out that Bartleby is harming the lawyer's successful business, he abandons him, forgetting his promise to help Bartleby. After Bartleby's tragic ending, he again prays to God, which makes him feel better. Thus, the narrator uses religion to appease his selfish actions.

The narrator views Bartleby inferior to human being based on his misunderstanding of him which causes him to deal Bartleby with no seriousness. From the narrator's point of view, he cannot understand how one does not eat, does not socialize with other people; therefore, he pities him and views him as a toy. In fact, Bartleby, himself does not ever feel sadness because he is lonely or poor. The narrator does value Bartleby as an individual, but an object because he is neutral.

The narrator says to Bartleby that, " You are harmless and noiseless as any of these old chairs; in short, I never feel so private as when I know you are here" (157). The narrator compares Bartleby to worn furniture and asserts that his existence is nothing more than an object. Therefore, this proves that

the narrator sneers at Bartleby and does not respect him as an individual. The lawyer justifies his looking down of Bartleby with the facade of religious good will for the sake of being able to portray a feigned compassion. Though the lawyer is annoyed of Bartleby's resistance to "not prefer" to do work which is harming his business, he tries to embrace him for the sake of being a good Christian. For example, he says that Bartleby and he are both "sons of Adam" and because of this when he gets angry of Bartleby, he recalls the "divine injunction [that said] "ye love one another" (156). Therefore, he convinces himself that he is doing all good for Bartleby as well as saying that it is his "mission in this world, to "furnish [Bartleby] with a office-room" (157).

As both of them being descendants of Adam, the narrator views Bartleby equal and that it is his duty to take care of Bartleby. Through this, the narrator convinces himself that he is being generous to Bartleby whose social status is subordinate to the lawyer. So, when Bartleby continues to disobey the narrator, he responds how Bartleby's actions are incomprehensible based on the generosity he has offered. He says, "

. Bartleby's perverseness seemed ungrateful, considering the undeniable good usage and indulgence he had received from me" (151). Thus, the narrator's religious good will of "undeniable good usage and indulgence" to Bartleby and considering him equal to him even though they are not equal in reality, convinces his mind and the readers that he is a good man. However, narrator's attempt to be a devout Christian and view Bartleby as a equal human being fails when Bartleby's actions harm his business. The narrator, an entrepreneur surrounded in the competitive Wall Street, wants to get rid
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of someone who is interfering on his way. He says, “ At length, necessities connected with my business tyrannized over all other considerations” (153).

Because business is the narrator’s priority, once the narrator discovers that Bartleby is no help to him, he abandons him and moves his office. Hence, when the narrator claims to not be responsible of Bartleby to other lawyers, he contradicts his mission to “ furnish Bartleby with a office room”. (157) He says, “ But, really, [Bartleby] is nothing to me—he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him (159). The lawyer believes that he has done every good religious act to help Bartleby and thus it is not his responsibility to take care of him anymore. The lawyer justifies his guilt of abandoning Bartleby by paying more money to the guards in the jail so that Bartleby can be provided with better food. But, Bartleby is not happy because he knows that the lawyer is simply doing it for the sake of pleasing himself. So when Bartleby encounters the lawyer, he says, “ I know you... an I want nothing to say to you” (161).

This highlights that even though the narrator attempted to help Bartleby, he did it just to please his own satisfaction. In the final part of the story, when the narrator discovers Bartleby to be dead, he is not sad or sorrowful. But, he prays Bartleby to be “ with kings and counselors” and thus believes that he is in a better place because he is praying for him to God. In short, this novel portrays the narrator’s quandary of having to be religious when it is harming his business.

In the more outer sense, this novel brings the question of whether religious values can coexist in the modern capitalism world.