

Machine over mind



The abstract notion of fulfillment is one that creates a never ending search. The issue that prevails is that it is intangible and therefore cannot be classified with the least bit of certainty. Society on the other hand, is run by the rule of mathematics, sciences and absolute answers. The intangibles are too philosophical and there are too many variables to account for, so in place of that the economic machine was created. American culture is driven by money, dependent upon success, and engulfed by tangible goods by which individuals can express their wealth to the rest of the world. Herman Melville explores this notion in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" as he criticizes the belief that financial success or an esteemed social status are synonymous with fulfillment. Melville uses the array of different characters to expose the internal struggles of society as it rages against the inner workings of the economic machine.

The pressure to succeed and thrive in today's world is one that can be overbearing for even the strongest of souls. Nippers, one of the clerks employed by the narrator, is a young man who is said to be the "victim of two evil powers - ambition and indigestion" (7). He constantly feels the urge to rise in the ranks of the legal world, yet this only strains his productivity and renders him unable to work in the mornings. Melville uses the term indigestion to represent uneasiness and anxiety that his dreams will never manifest into reality. Contrary to Nippers, Turkey is an elder fellow of 60 years-old who symbolizes the tendency to "burn out" after ambitions run dry. Each day Turkey shows up ready to work in the same meticulous manner he has in all the years prior. However, as soon as the clock hits noon he proves himself to be completely ineffective. Constant errors arise in his

work in compliment to his irate outbursts. This is a result of not simply a morning of work, but rather the culmination of tough working years with minimal salary. A once hopeful employee, full of ambition and glee, is now a bitter old man who is only reluctantly adding fuel to the machine. To add to this notion of burning out, Melville includes the character of Ginger Nut as a foil. Ginger Nut is merely 12 years-old, yet his father has already forced him to work in order to set him up for success. Earning only one dollar an hour, he does anything from cleaning to running errands for the law office. The sad reality is Ginger Nut does not know better, and from a young age is already beginning the process of running himself dry before he has even had the chance to develop his own unique passions. The pressure to succeed drives the characters to moral ruination.

The split between the social pressure to succeed and moral pressure to do right is enough to buckle the narrator under the weight of social pressures. Charitable acts are a common theme that is strung out by the narrator to assure himself of his morally upright ways. The issue that arises for the narrator is these particular acts are not out of pure kindness, but rather to be deemed as kind by society. This clear distinction is proven by how the narrator immediately abandons Bartleby once he becomes the source of gossip among fellow Wall Street inhabitants. Upon Bartleby's declaration that he will not be partaking in any more copying, the narrator notes that Bartleby "Not only disarmed me but unmanned me" (19). By unmanning the narrator, Bartleby has broken down his inner barriers. This creates a comfortable sensation within the narrator that he is obligated to care for Bartleby regardless of his eccentricities. This makes him feel like a grade A

philanthropist as he should. Bartleby is causing no harm to anyone and even makes the kind remark saying he would “prefer not to quit you” (30).

However, the allowance of Bartleby to remain on the premises is abruptly revoked when clients of the law firm begin to think of it as strange. The narrator’s social reputation is at stake and his acts prove that he values that over doing what is morally right. Although he mentions several times that we are all sons of Adam, that belief is pushed to the side when some begin to question his doings. The egotistical atmosphere of Wall Street has created a culture where doing the right thing is not always acceptable and has shifted the priorities to a place where being a prominent figure is more important than being thoughtful. This represents the cynical cycle of social interaction and eventually leads to Bartleby saying, “I know you, and I want nothing to say to you” (38). A world in which Wall Street’s critical perception of all is valued over a strong moral code is not sufficient. In fact, it will bleed into all facets of the working environment until utter despair sets in.

The propensity to consume time with negligible tasks will create a sense of worthlessness. The concept of time is paradoxical in the sense that while it never ends, it is concurrently finite. Life’s clock will tick for eternity yet Melville uses the job of scribes to show how easily this time can be wasted. Copying documents day in and day out for the duration of a career will damage anyone’s sense of self. If Turkey were to describe his life’s work to a jury, there would be a consensus that there is little to show for all his hard worked years. This in culmination with other shortcomings has made him feel inferior to others. When addressing the narrator, he uses the phrase “with submission” seven times throughout the text. Melville does this to

strengthen his point that a minuscule job is simply just representative of the pointless acts that happen each and every day. Acts that add no value to life, but occur simply because there is a perception that they should be done. It is an ingenious criticism of how society manages to waste our finite time by mindlessly going through the motions rather than seeking out true happiness. The irony in how Bartleby is perceived versus what he is standing for is too much to ignore. For obvious reason, he is looked at as more or less of a charity case or someone who is mentally ill. However, putting his “eccentricities” aside, it is clear that he is the wisest of all. He understands how insignificant his tasks are and eventually comes to the conclusion that they are simply not worth doing. The narrator is befuddled by this notion as he still believes that his “most precious papers perfectly safe in his hands” (18). However, earning a mere four cents per every 100 words of copying is nowhere near the recognition needed to satisfy or fulfill an individual. For this very reason, Bartleby looks past what is thought to be normal and realizes he’d “prefer not” to do just about anything. The inability to reach a level of attainment renders an individual to do not much more than stare at a lifeless brick wall.

A demoralizing end is in store for those who fail to discover a sense of purpose that is in alignment with society’s status quo. A false sense of acceptance and tolerance has never been more prevalent than it is today. All of the previous points conjoin under the belief that society has created a place where one’s purpose is predetermined and anyone who wishes to deviate from that will be shunned. Wall Street is the epitome of economic power and accomplishment. By making the choice to have Wall Street as the

setting, Melville demonstrates that money certainly does not equal happiness. Bartleby is surrounded by success every day, yet it does not appear to be the least bit important to him. He feels alone in a crowded room as the narrator decides to “ isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice” (11). Money, popularity, or companionship did not give Bartleby a purpose in his life and for that reason he felt absolutely nothing. The machine has brain washed society to the point where it is unable to accept anyone whose sole purpose is not to become wealthy or successful. Bartleby became just another example of how unforgiving the world can be as when the end came, he “ preferred not to” take one more breath.

Herman Melville depicts the erroneous nature of society to value money and power above all else. The economic machine fuels daily life further and further in the wrong direction by valuing physical objects over joy and fulfillment. No longer are people searching for what will produce happiness, but rather working themselves to death in attempt to make their wallets heavier. “ Bartleby, the Scrivener” shows what will become of our generation if there is not a distinct shift in mindset over what is important in life. The characters within the plot so accurately depict the inner struggles of humankind to live life in the most outstanding manner. A harmonious heart filled with joy will always reign above the bank account filled with barren green paper.