

The mask of melville's lawyer in bartleby

Profession



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Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* gives the reader an unnerving, yet nonchalant look at a story of a man dulled by the repetitiveness of urban life. Melville's characters are rife with symbolism, but it is also the many allegories of modern life that makes it so powerful. Indeed setting the story in 19th century Wall Street portends of the coming wealth and power of New York City, and the real life existence of the characters in *Bartleby* that predated this prosperity and who continue to exist today.

The character of the Lawyer in Herman Melville's *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is thrust into an outright confusing situation that he has never encountered in his life. "All who know me, consider me an eminently safe man," (Melville 2) he says as he describes himself. Although a lawyer by profession, he does not involve himself with the intricacies and ethics of the law, merely content on dealing with property and other rich men's businesses. As Davis says:

Obviously, the lawyer is a man dedicated to the laws of the earth, and, not only has he dedicated himself to these laws, but deals exclusively with the laws of property, of rich men's bonds and mortgages and title deeds. The narrator seems to hold no interest, or, at the least, no ambition in practicing law that demands of him thoughts of "higher" things. Before the appearance of *Bartleby*, by the narrator's own admission, he has not struggled with the ethics of justice, of good and evil; rather, he makes his way in this world comfortable by dealing with the physical, the tangible, that which he can know. (2)

Relating this idea to Dunbar's *We Wear the Mask*, the Lawyer who hires *Bartleby* has hidden himself from these higher functions from the world, and

the people around him, by wearing this mask of feigned simple-mindedness. " We wear the mask that grins and lies, It hides our cheeks and shades our eyes—" (Dunbar 1-2). It prevents the Lawyer from actually accepting who Bartleby is till the end of the story. Through the years, this mask becomes ingrained to the personality of the Lawyer, that he fails to understand anything that touches him through this shield.

Yet this is exactly what Bartleby does, and what evokes the Lawyer and the reader's interest at the same time. We are curious as to who this strange creature is and why he is that odd. Chisdes provides an interesting comparison between the two main characters.

This story is a story of contrast between Bartleby and the narrator. The narrator does everything possible to reach out to his fellow humans; and Bartleby does everything possible to cut himself off from his fellow humans. Whereas the narrator embraces life, Bartleby rejects it. (Chisdes par. 23)

Bartleby does not choose a mask for himself, rather, his has already eroded into the sullen drudgery of office life. The Lawyer's narration of his " rumor" at the end, of how Bartleby was working at a Dead Letter Office (Melville 37) reveal that although Bartleby changed him, his mask remains on him. In the words of Mason, " The lawyer gives Bartleby a peaceful and contented ending to diminish his culpability in Bartleby's demise." (par 7). Till the end, the Lawyer does not recognize his relationship with Bartleby outside his mask of pretend virtue. He first decides to place him aside, but with his associates getting curious about this shell of a man in his office, he decides he cannot take anymore.

Why should the world be over-wise, In counting all our tears and sighs? Nay,
let them only see us while, We wear the mask. (Dunbar 6-9)

The Lawyer cannot stomach this aberration. Not because he is worried about himself, but about what other people think of him. He only lets the world see him while wearing his mask.

At last I was made aware that all through the circle of my professional acquaintance, a whisper of wonder was running round, having reference to the strange creature I kept at my office. This worried me very much.
(Melville 28)

Bartleby only serves to highlight this deficiency in the Lawyer's character, something that is true for each one of us. Dunbar's poem reflects our inner weaknesses, that we only integrate with culture through a persona. As the Lawyer was presented with someone whom the mask of himself is not affecting, he becomes confused, leading to the darkly humorous events that follow.

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