

A comparison and contrast of herman melville's

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Herman Melville's "Bartleby, Scrivener" (1853) and Franz Kafka's "A Hunger Artist" (1924) are short stories that deal with the complexities of man in the social setting. Melville is most well known for his novel Moby Dick while Kafka was virtually unknown during his lifetime and has no published novels but has since gained recognition for his short stories, including "Metamorphoses" (1915).

It would be interesting to note how a comparison of these two similar stories will reveal the personality of the writer. This paper will provide a brief synopsis of the stories and will then be analyzed for points of comparison and contrast.

Synopses

"Bartleby, Scrivener"

Melville's tale deals primarily with a particular scrivener, also known as a law-copier or in modern usage a petition writer as set in this story. The scrivener, Bartleby is an unaccountable man as described by the narrator whom at the time of the events that took place a Master in Chancery.

Bartleby is at first industrious in scrivener work, although he steadfastly refused to do any other activity and appeared not to eat or do anything but his work, and even seemed to live in the office. The narrator describes his feelings of astonishment, sympathy and subsequent acceptance of this eccentricity because his other employees also had their vagaries.

As the story progresses, however, Bartleby's behavior becomes stranger; he stops working but refuses to leave and eventually drives his employer from his office. Bartleby remains in the building even after being booted out of the room and is eventually arrested for vagrancy. The narrator is conscience-

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stricken and strives to do all he can for Bartleby, who soon after dies in prison. (Melville, 1994)

“ The Hunger Artist”

The story begins with a statement of decline in interest in hunger artists. It is told from a third person point of view and sketches a history of the popularity of hunger artists and the process of the art. It muses upon the intentions of those who subscribe to the spectacle, and the personal views and feelings of one particular artist, dwelling upon his frustration of having his work ended prematurely, a maximum of 40 days per each fasting period, in the interest of profit.

The hunger artist knew he could last longer and yearned to find out to what extent, but was not allowed.

The story describes how interest in the activity seemed suddenly to cease and rather than pursuing his previous modus operandi, the hunger artist preferred to break away from his manager and hire himself out to the circus, where he was placed in a cage near the menagerie, and was all but forgotten. At last he was able to indulge in his wish. Just before he died, he revealed that he fasted not to make himself famous but because there was no food he enjoyed. (Kafka, 1924)

Analysis

The two stories considered have distinct parallels, most notable the title characters. Both Bartleby and the hunger artist are distinguished by a sense of hopelessness and searching. The characters, the former silently, the other in self-revelation, express their need to find a place to belong.

They clearly do not fit in accepted society. Bartleby because of his very asceticism, lack of interpersonal relations and history is almost a ghost, an enigma that even the most kindly of intentions could not draw out. He repulsed any kind of contact, perhaps because he was speculated to have been engaged in activity, that of a dead letter clerk, that dealt with the rejected and discarded. He clearly considered himself beyond salvation.

The hunger artist, because of his search for the unattainable, is unable to enjoy the material pleasures of life and live a normal life. He deprived himself of life because he saw no point in continuing with it, reserving the pleasure of knowledge of how far he could take his artistry as his last stand against life.

The stories are clearly macabre, elucidating the grimness of life of no purpose and no connection. They deal with the reality that man is essentially a creature of society, and failure of interaction results in strange and appalling consequences.

The style of the writing is the most notable contrast of the two stories. Melville deals with the subject in a humorous fashion, drawing a smile, even a laugh with his description of his characters and the circumstances until the very end, which makes the horror of what has become of Bartleby all the more stark.

Kafka adopted a gloomy tone from the start, indicating a grim end in the very first sentence of the story. The reader knows the hunger artist is doomed to a life of obscurity at the very least. The twist at the end, when the

artist reveals the cause of his compunction for self-destruction, illustrates the writer's own dissatisfaction with life.