

ENGL 3060 Modern and Contemporary Literature

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January 6, 2003****Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener"**

"Pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn!" (Melville 110) – exclaims the lawyer – the first person narrator in Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" – upon opening the door to the young Bartleby. His new scrivener turns out to be a silent but productive worker with few needs. Arresting, however, is Bartleby's unwillingness to do anything but copy and write. Every time he is assigned an extra chore, Bartleby declines stating that he "prefer[s] not to" (Melville 115) complete it. Perplexed, the lawyer tries to figure out the reasons for his scrivener's attitude, but can come to no steadfast conclusions: Bartleby opens himself up to neither his superior nor to the other employees, Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut. After a few days, Bartleby suddenly decides not to do any more work at all. Instead, he chooses to stare at the wall outside his window. However, contrary to what one may expect in a situation such as this, the lawyer does not fire Bartleby. Moreover, he becomes fascinated with his employee's courage and solitary character while still trying to coo Bartleby to work. In the end, all efforts turn out fruitless as Bartleby holds firm his resolution to do nothing. In consequence, the lawyer finally decides to rid himself of his stubborn employee by moving his offices to another building and quitting Bartleby's position. Bartleby, who refuses to leave his place of work ends up in jail. Here, he dies not long after being admitted.

Bartleby's "I prefer not to" is a "NO! in thunder" (Melville 312) similar to what Melville ascribes to Hawthorne. Bartleby has the courage to communicate his views and

wishes and holds on to his sovereignty without letting himself be swayed by the opinions of others. He is defiant to do exactly what he wants and will not give in to outside forces or let his position be undermined. This can be seen in his almost stubborn resistance towards leaving the offices of the lawyer after they were sold. Despite ending up in jail and dying, Bartleby not once sacrificed his independence. Melville may thus agree that Bartleby's is a "NO! in thunder; but the Devil himself cannot make him say yes" (Melville 312).

Throughout Melville's short story, the lawyer is at odds with Bartleby's peculiar characteristics. He cannot understand his employee's behavior and is astonished by Bartleby's courage to refuse assignments. Although Melville creates the impression of a story that is mainly concerned with Bartleby, I believe more emphasis should be placed on examining the lawyer. After all, the story actually describes the lawyer and his attitude towards Bartleby rather than telling of Bartleby's life itself. The lawyer is the one through which the reader experiences the events. His opinions flow into what we think of Bartleby and thus skew our perspective of the overall situation. Our perception of Bartleby thus underlies the peculiarities of the narrator which include especially his superficial interest in Bartleby as well as his naïveté towards understanding his employee's problems. Evidence hereof includes not only the lawyer's disinterest as to why Bartleby spends his nights at the offices but also the lawyer's oblivious attitude towards Bartleby's deteriorating condition. Further, the little interest which the narrator does show for his employee (i.e. "Will you tell me, Bartleby, where you were born?", Melville 122) stems not from true interest but merely from a need for entertainment and satisfaction of his curiosity. Overall, I believe the lawyer is merely trying to figure out how Bartleby's limited and disturbed interaction affects his own life rather than that of his employees or that of Bartleby's. In a sense, the lawyer acts rather selfish and egocentric.

If he had wanted to, I believe Melville could have made Bartleby's character more easily understandable by telling the story from the perspective of a neutrally omniscient narrator rather than from the view of the lawyer. This way, the reader would have had the opportunity to create her own objective opinions of the issues without being influenced by one of the characters involved.

Melville uses the description of setting and tone within his story to illuminate the characteristics of the lawyer and his scrivener. Bartleby, for instance, is positioned at a window with a view which "might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call 'life'" (Melville 111). Similarly, Bartleby himself seems to be lacking 'life' and energy making him just as tame as the "lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade" (Melville 111) facing his desk. Thus, his dull character and unwillingness to change can be seen as being analogous to a living organism which stops growing because it receives no sunlight. Bartleby similarly receives no inspiration or energy from the outside – he is overtowered and shadowed by the routine of copying and writing and has been dulled by his prior job at the "Dead Letter Office".

The lawyer's attitude and characteristics are also emphasized with the help of the story's setting. On one hand, the Wallstreet scenario of Melville's story creates an atmosphere of bustling activity similar to the lawyer's hurried businesses – which prevent him from taking time to deal with Bartleby. On the other hand, it also gives the impression of a cut throat environment – an environment where each individual is focused on the job ahead with no regard for the people around. Similarly, the lawyer is principally interested in his business and his colleagues and shows only superficial interests in his employees' wellbeing.

Taken as a whole, it is this complementing description of characters and surroundings within Melville's story which help the reader visualize the situation and circumstances.

Melville's seemingly modern story invokes a feeling of sorrow for Bartleby. It ends tragically and leaves not only many questions unanswered but also leaves the reader without any clue towards the peculiarities of the characters. We do not fully understand Bartleby's character and cannot learn more since we see the story from the eyes of the narrator. However, a situation in which the reader would have been allowed to step into each character's shoes could have cleared all misunderstandings and helped in learning of all perspectives of the situation. This is precisely what Melville's story incorporates:

society in general is focused on a first person view of daily life and events. However, as we see in "Bartleby – the Scrivener", this invariably leads to confusion, conflict as well as intolerance. I do not doubt to say that our world would be a better place to live if only we could open ourselves up to viewing society from as many perspectives as possible.

Tim O'Brien, "How to Tell a True War Story"

In "How to Tell a True War Story", Tim O'Brien combines various Vietnam war stories into a text discussing the fallacies and intricacies of the War Story genre. The excerpt begins in mid-sentence with a recollection of one of the author's Vietnam war buddies. In this story, one of the characters experiences the death of his friend and decides to write a letter of condolence to the family. While he's writing, he begins to reflect upon his friend's character: "A great, great guy. [...] great sense of humor [...] he had the right attitude" (O'Brien 459). The various stories within "How to Tell a True War Story" are nearly all written in a colloquial style and use harsh expressions in order to reflect the realism of the situations. For the most part, O'Brien uses an omniscient narrator. However, he does switch to a first person point-of-view while telling us of the events within his various stories. This switch in narration styles makes it harder for readers to follow the setup of the text altogether but also creates a line of separation between the examples (the stories he tells about the Vietnam War) and his conclusions (specifics concerning the genre).

In-between each of these 'recollections' and stories, O'Brien explains some of the important aspects and considerations of war stories in general: "A true war story is never moral, [...] It's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen, [...] You can tell a true war story by the way it never seems to end" (O'Brien 459). Overall, I do not believe there is one specific moral which stands out among the entire text. O'Brien may simply be pointing to the fact that we, as readers, should be cautious to interpret what we read in war stories. As he says, "it's difficult to separate what happened from what seemed to happen" (O'Brien 460) because many times an author will perhaps knowingly or unknowingly exaggerate in order to make a story as a whole more believable. The

setting of Tim O'Brien's war stories reflect this exaggeration by including very many details and lengthy descriptions of the surroundings – some of which perhaps may not correspond to what actually happened. Among others, this type of exaggeration makes the texts difficult to understand and difficult to bring into context since the reader cannot distinguish between what happened and what seemed to happen.

Melville, Herman. "Bartleby, the Scrivener." *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*. Michael Meyer. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. 25.

Melville, Herman. "On Nathaniel Hawthorne's Tragic Vision." *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*. Michael Meyer. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. 1.

O'Brien, Tim. "How to Tell a True War Story." *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*. Michael Meyer. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2000. 9.