

The Scrivener's Rebellion- An Essay of Herman Melville's "Bartleby, The Scrivener"

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The corporate world has often been viewed as dehumanizing and given a dark existence, victimizing its workers with machine-like jobs for low wages. These employees are constantly reminded how easily replaceable they are and are forced to work as much as possible in order to maintain job security. No matter what may be occurring in the worker's life, they are expected to show up early in the morning and stay late in the evening. This description is not new, but when Herman Melville wrote *Bartleby, the Scrivener* in 1853, this socially progressive short story is the first to show the budding corporate world and the effects of capitalism on workers in a negative and inhumane way.

The characters of this story work on Wall Street, the heart of the corporate world, in offices that isolate them from nature. The narrator describes the scene from his window as "commanding an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade...pushed up to within ten feet of my window pane" (Melville 1094). The black wall, with the effect of no sunlight, would make the observation dark, as though there wasn't even a window there in the first place. With no vegetation or nature to enjoy, it would be easy to feel disconnected from the outside world. This also creates an atmosphere of imprisonment. The author describes Bartleby's view as "a window...commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light" (Melville 1098). This description of Bartleby's corner conjures up an image of a prison cell, especially after he is isolated even further by a high green folding screen set between him and the narrator. Bartleby could be seen when he was needed and locked away securely the rest of the time.

Corporate ownership of employees is shown when Bartleby is discovered living at the office. On his way to church one Sunday the narrator drops by only to be surprised when Bartleby answers the door, proclaiming to his boss that he "preferred not admitting him at present...he was deeply engaged," suggesting to his boss to take a walk and return later (Melville 1103). Upon returning and inspecting the Bartleby-free office, the narrator discovers "a blanket...black box and brush...a tin basin, with soap and a ragged towel...a morsel of cheese"-evidence that the man is squatting there (Melville 1104). What a miserable existence, to be property of the corporate world. Living in an empty, desolate office after hours is pitiful. Having to share your most personal belongings with the space you work in is humiliating. There becomes no separation from work and home life. This lack of privacy takes a toll on the human spirit.

The nature of the work at the law office exploits each character differently, yet in a way that connects them as mirror images. The job of a scrivener is a "very dull, wearisome, and lethargic affair" (Melville 1098). Their duty is to copy law documents by hand, then verify the accuracy word for word. So not only must they copy an already existing document, they must mindlessly chant it out loud to make sure it has been transcribed correctly. Imagine the monotony of this job in a dark, isolated corner of an office. Anyone could do this job, but who would want to?

Two of the scriveners, Nippers and Turkey, develop poor working skills and health issues due to the pressure and stress of working uncreatively. Neither man could adapt to a full, meaningless day of joyless work. Nippers is a unambitious young man who suffers from indigestion and nervousness in the morning but feels well enough by the afternoon to work to his potential. On the flipside, Turkey, an older gentleman, is more productive in the morning than in the afternoon when he creates incredible messes of inkblots. As the narrator puts it, "their fits relieved each other like guards" (Melville 1096). The narrator and Bartleby are also like double sides of the same coin. The narrator's name is never given in the story, making him anonymous and giving him no strong individuality or personality. With the motto of "the easiest way of life is the best," he goes to great lengths to avoid conflicts. This motto also carries over to his field of work. The narrator is a lawyer that refuses to fight for others in the courtroom. When faced with the closure of his job at the Master of the Chancery, he adapts by accepting his current position in the matter of bonds, mortgages and title deeds. He is a conformist, in part to maintain peace and in part for self survival. Bartleby is the opposite. At first appearance in the story, he is given a "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn" appearance, creating a half-dead air about him as if he has endured something that drained the life out of him (Melville 1097). Not much is known about the cadaverous man who prefers not to answer any questions. All that we know about Bartleby is how he performs at work, which is machine-like, copying documents at an amazing pace. But not even the best-oiled machine can run at top speed forever. Exhausted to the point of near death, he begins to rebel. Instead of conforming as the narrator would have, Bartleby tells his boss that he 'prefers not' to do any work. This is a "pure act of power and free will" (Giles 89). He rebels against the corporate world because he refused to adjust to something as horrible as the life he is now living. To have partiality and the determination to act on them in front of the boss is the "ultimate realization of freedom and selfhood" (Giles 89). His actions eventually get him placed in the court system (referred to as the "Tombs") as a vagrant for not working or leaving the office after the narrator relocates. This is where Bartleby stages his final act of rebellion. He "prefers not" to dine, wasting away until he is found "strangely huddled at the base of the wall... his head touching the cold stone," the world of Wall Street claiming another victim (Melville 1117). Bartleby's refusal to become a victim of the corporate world leads him to the ultimate freedom that only death can offer.

At the end of the story, we learn of Bartleby's former employment as a subordinate clerk at the dead letter office. A change in administration resulted in his unemployment, and instead of adapting, he simply shuts down in his feeble attempt as a scrivener. Many letters of importance, such as charity or declarations of love, only made it to the flames. As the narrator says: "on errands of life, these letters speed to death" (Melville 1118). The work at the dead letter office was so soul-crushing, burning letters that have no destination by the cartload that Bartleby was already near death by the time he came to work for the narrator.

Herman Melville drew on personal experiences to write *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. As a writer, he knew how the corporate world treated artists. Melville was quoted as saying:

What I feel most moved to write, that is banned-it will not pay. Yet altogether, write the *other* way I cannot. So the product is a final hash, and all my books are botches. (Melville 1090)

Throughout his career he had many failures, even burning his own work in disgust. In 19th century America, jobs were scarce and when a person found one career, it was hard to change to a better or more rewarding job. Being stuck in a dead end job with no foreseeable way out can dehumanize a worker into feeling like a mindless drone, controlled and owned by whom he works for. The dead letter office can be interpreted as a metaphor for the artists' struggle. Originality and creativity are not welcome. In *Bartleby*, Melville portrays the corporate world in that light. Death permeates throughout this short story. The description of Bartleby, the job of scrivener, the view from the offices, the health of the employees, Bartleby's imprisonment in the "Tombs," eventual self starvation and death are the effects of working in an environment that deny the human spirit what it needs to survive - nature, nurture, and human contact. By creating a uniform, solitary, and life-less environment for employees to produce as much as inhumanly possible, corporations take away the connection with the outside world and with other humans, which can lead to a personal rebellion when one refuses to trade originality and creativity for job "security."

Works Cited

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