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Bartleby, the Stranger: A Misfit in the Workplace

Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is the story of a Wall Street lawyer whose life is shaken by his inability to understand his bizarre, new clerk, Bartleby. Bartleby defies authority and reason, and the narrator and his other clerks do not know what to make of this, nor does the reader. The characters are shaped by their actions and descriptions, as well as their interactions with each other. Bartleby's strangeness is particularly emphasized by contrast to the more normal characters around him.

Bartleby, the narrator says, is "a scrivener, the strangest [he] ever saw" (125). He is described several times as "cadaverous." This fits his physical appearance, with his pallid complexion and glazed eyes, but more strongly suits his demeanor, his cold responses and lack of visible emotion. Upon arrival, Bartleby quickly becomes the lawyer's best copyist, remaining in his partition all day and working with the greatest efficiency. However, he refuses to check his copies, as he "would prefer not to," and this firm, passive resistance is the source of conflict. The lawyer wishes to dismiss him for his willful misconduct, but is put off by the absence of "anything ordinarily human about him" (130). He says that he would be just as well to fire his bust of Cicero, comparing Bartleby's emotional capacity to that of a statue (130). Overall, there is little solid information given about Bartleby; mystery is the primary element of his character. By providing only cryptic details, Melville leaves the audience with as much astonishment as the other characters in the story. No matter how one pores over this story, one can only speculate about Bartleby's motivations.

The narrator is a lawyer, an elderly gentleman who holds that “the easiest way of life is the best” (125). He constructs a partition in his office for Bartleby, so that he can have the man under his thumb without having to look at him. His pride contrasts interestingly with that of Bartleby. The clerk puts no emphasis on comfort at all, confining himself to his partition entirely. The narrator, however, values pleasure and respectability. He complains about the elimination of his cushy position as Master of the Chancery, and he brags of his employment under the wealthy John Jacob Aster (125). The narrator is a man who is not used to being refused. He states that the reason he places Bartleby so close is to “avail [himself] of his services on...trivial occasions”, and he has a “natural expectancy of compliance” (130). He thinks that the refusal must be a mistake and, as the problem worsens, he cannot stop thinking of it. He even imagines a crowd to be discussing his dilemma. The narrator eventually begins to feel a paternal obligation towards Bartleby, as he comes to believe that he is destined to tolerate Bartleby for the sake of the clerk’s welfare and happiness. However, he cares too much about appearances and is embarrassed by visitors’ reactions to Bartleby. Though he surrenders responsibility of the clerk, he never stops thinking about him and despairs at his death. The narrator serves as a dynamic protagonist. The story is truly about his reactions to Bartleby, and he is changed more than anyone else for having met him. At the beginning, he is largely unemotional as he describes the strange temperaments of his two veteran scriveners, Turkey and Nippers. He has lived a happy life, having “never experienced aught but a not displeasing sadness” until he meets Bartleby (135). It is Bartleby who brings out the emotion in him. After being refused, he shows indignation, as well as a genuine sympathy and sorrow for poor Bartleby. Perhaps he expresses his emotions in an unconscious desire to make the clerk do the same. The narrator is very matter-of-fact at the beginning of the story, but, as the story progresses and he further recalls his experience with Bartleby, he injects more of his feelings into his speech, which becomes more dramatic. Bartleby is the great tragedy of his life, and it is unlikely that he will ever forget him.

Bartleby stands in sharp contrast to his fellow clerks. Turkey and Nippers are opposites in many ways. Turkey begins the day pleasantly, while growing in consternation as the day goes on. Nipper starts the day roughly, but grows more composed as the day progresses. The two are portrayed vividly, with descriptions of Turkey's shining head and Nippers's "piratical look" (126, 127). Their physical appearances, as well as their absurd changes in behavior over the course of a day, make these two comical characters. They are flat and mostly static characters, and their main purpose is to act as foils to Bartleby. While they have extreme temperaments, they are among the "normal" characters in the story; it is Bartleby, with his consistent lack of emotion, who is the strange one. He simply doesn't fit in with the other employees.

Because "Bartleby, the Scrivener" focuses on Bartleby's eccentricity, characterization is of the utmost importance. The characters are revealed by the way they behave, especially in regard to each other, as well as the way the narrator describes them. Melville uses these methods to bring his characters to life, casting Bartleby as a misfit who escapes all understanding by the narrator and audience.

Works Cited

Melville, Herman. "Bartleby, the Scrivener." *The Compact Bedford Introduction to Literature*. 8th ed.
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