

Americans popularly believe the United States to be a country where the freedom of choice and equality prevail. Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" challenges this assumption by questioning these American ideals within the confines of the American economic system. Melville compares Bartleby's expression of choice to the power and expectations of Wall Street; however, the story is not, as the title at first suggests, a narrative of Bartleby the man, but instead through setting, character, and precise diction becomes a story which ultimately defines not Bartleby but Wall Street, an entity whose character restricts freedom of choice and equality and is both intimately intertwined and in conflict with America's perception of its national identity.

In the second paragraph, evidence points to Wall Street as the primary character. Melville writes, "Ere introducing the scrivener . . . it is fit I make some mention of myself, my employees, my business, my chambers, and general surroundings; because some such description is indispensable to an adequate understanding of the chief character to be described" (124). This passage suggests several things. First, because Melville's diction never directly identifies the "chief character", he leaves the "character to be described" (124) ambiguous and open to interpretation; the character may be Bartleby or it may be Wall Street.

Second, the passage conveys that the story aims to create "adequate understanding of [its] chief character" (124), yet the narrator maintains that Bartleby's character to be "one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable" (161), and ends the tale by revealing that he is "unable to wholly gratify" the reader's "curiosity as to who Bartleby was" (161). This paradox suggests that either the narrator failed to create an "adequate understanding" (124) of Bartleby or Bartleby does not serve as the "chief character" (124). If the story works to create an understanding of

Bartleby, then it fails. On the other hand, if the story seeks to reveal the character of Wall Street, it succeeds.

Additionally, the subtitle of the narrative, “A Story of Wall Street” implicitly informs the reader the story is “of”, or about, Wall Street and thus suggests Bartleby serves to reveal something about Wall Street rather than himself. If Melville chose to title the piece “A Story of Bartleby the Scrivener” the reader could safely assume Bartleby as the most important character; however, he did not. As it is, Bartleby and the other characters serve as foils for characters Wall Street.

Melville’s unusual choice to use setting as the primary character for “Bartleby” raises the question: What *is* the character of Wall Street and how is this character important to the story? To answer these questions some discussion of setting is required. Melville’s narrator describes his office at one end as looking out on “a white wall of the interior of a spacious skylight shaft” (125) and at the other “a view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade . . . [that] was pushed up to within ten feet of [the] windowpane. Owing to the great height of the surrounding buildings, and my chambers being on the second floor the interval between this wall and mine . . . resembled a huge square cistern” (125). Melville places the office on the second floor of a building so tall it requires an interior light shaft and then hems it in with an adjacent building. The “great height” (125) of the surrounding building creates tension between high and low, while the placement of the characters within this oppressive, stark, and physical hierarchy on the second floor symbolizes their subordinate place on Wall Street. The physical hierarchy created by the tall buildings and the symbolic placement of the lawyer’s office reveal an inconsistency between the American ideal of equality and realities of the American economic system through physical setting.

In addition to setting, Melville uses diction and character to demonstrate the way Wall Street affects American notions of freedom. When asked to check the accuracy of his copy with the narrator he responds “I would prefer not to” (132). Throughout the story Bartleby continues to “prefer not to” do more and more things. He never directly refuses just expresses his preference not to participate. Of course, the word preference means “the power or opportunity of choosing” (“preference”) and given this definition, Melville’s choice in diction imbues Bartleby with the power to or opportunity to choose. Unfortunately for Bartleby, engaging in freedom of choice pushes against the power and requirements of Wall Street and ultimately kills him. Bartleby’s inability to “prefer” or choose reveals that the rule of Wall Street dominates and nullifies the ideals of freedom of choice.

Bartleby reveals his feeling of discontent within the confines of the American financial center through his preference while other characters struggle against its constriction in a variety of ways. For example, Melville describes Turkey, one of the lawyer’s scriveners, as having a face that after his “dinner hour . . . blazed like a grate full of Christmas coals” (126). In other words, Turkey gets drunk at lunch. When confronted by his employer about his unruliness in the post-lunch hours, Turkey replies, “In the morning I but marshal and deploy my columns, but in the afternoon I put myself to their head, and gallantly charge the foe” (127). Turkey’s hyperbolic statement creates tension between a fantasy of chivalric heroism and the drab realities of a scrivener’s work. As revealed by Turkey’s chivalric and militaristic diction, the alcohol allows him to escape and imagine himself brave, assertive, and independent in a job that allows no room for personality or chivalric forms of masculinity. Turkey’s daily need to escape through drinking and his statement about “gallantly charging the foe” (127) tells a story about the oppression of individual expression within the daily confines of Wall Street.

Melville uses Bartleby to represent the American ideal of freedom of choice then creates tension through restriction of that choice. Turkey becomes symbolic of Wall Street's suppression of individual expression and masculinity while the setting mimics figurative notions of confinement and hierarchy. Melville succeeds in creating an "adequate understanding" (124) of the character of Wall Street; however, as a result of the restrictions on freedom, the implication of a hierarchy, and the oppression of the individual Melville's Wall Street fails to live up to the ideals of America's national identity.

Works Cited

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