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Obsession and Depression: Bartleby's Place in the Melville Canon

Herman Melville is best-known for his stories about adventure on the high seas and encounters with native peoples. *Typee*, *Moby Dick*, and "Benito Cereno" all take as their setting ships, the sea, and remote islands populated with native peoples. At first glance, Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener" does not appear to adhere to the themes and conventions present in his other work. There are obvious differences between this story and Melville's other works; "Bartleby, the Scrivener" has nothing to do with seafaring, for example. And yet, this story is perfectly at home in Melville's body of work. "Bartleby, the Scrivener" embodies the classic Melville themes of obsession and depression, despite its modern setting.

Many of Melville's characters grapple with depression. We need only be introduced to Captain Ahab in *Moby Dick* to see the depths of his obsession with vanquishing the great white whale. Bartleby is just as obsessive, single-mindedly copying documents day after day. The narrator reveals, on more than one occasion, that Bartleby appears to work unendingly, producing an "extraordinary quantity of writing" (Melville 10). Bartleby's obsession with his work arguably pushes him into a deep depression, made all the worse by his confinement in a two-story office building. The lack of sunlight afforded by the building, due to the office's proximity to larger, towering buildings, contributes to Bartleby's condition. In his article "Melville's Parable of the Walls," Leo Marx explains that "The Walls are the controlling symbols of the story...the walls which hem in the meditative artist and for that matter every reflective man" (241). The confining nature of Bartleby's workplace, while it affords him a machine-like efficiency in his work, slowly causes him to stop doing anything at all.

Setting the story in Manhattan is also not entirely out-of-character for Melville. Many of his stories begin or end in the city. The office building conveys a sense of modernism that is seemingly absent in many of Melville's other works. Looking deeper we can see that Melville is no stranger to commenting on the increasingly modern world he is living in. In *The Cambridge Introduction to*

Herman Melville, Kevin J. Hayes points out that “In Melville’s writings, the theme of modernity occurs at least as early as *White-Jacket*” (81). Melville often deals with the theme of encroaching modernity and the depression and restlessness this can cultivate. Notably, in *Moby Dick* Ishmael’s reason for going to sea is to counter his depression, a depression not unlike that which we witness Bartleby sliding into over the course of the story.

“Bartleby, the Scrivener” is a melancholy commentary on what can happen to people when they are confined to the relatively lifeless existence of an office worker. Like many of his contemporaries, Melville writes often about the unstoppable march of modernity. Bartleby may appear to exist on his own amongst Melville’s other more energetic creations, but the obsession and subsequent depression that plagues Bartleby in his decidedly modern world is not unlike that which is explored in the larger body of Melville’s work.

Works Cited

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