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A Deconstruction of Good Intentions in "Bartleby"

Though entitled "Bartleby," Herman Melville's short story is truly about the inner turmoil of Bartleby's former employer during their brief acquaintance. Bartleby is a quiet, reserved, and stubborn man that is determined to some inexpressible fate. His silence and obstinance intrigue his new employer, who finds himself wrestling with various notions of brotherhood and social responsibility. For all his attempts at what he believes is assisting this man, his relief comes when Bartleby is sent to a prison known as "the Tombs" and shortly thereafter dies. Most often seen as a story about charity and Christian responsibility, this story can also be seen as a tale of selfishness and a lack of compassion.

In the opening few pages of the story, the narrator gives us a misleading introduction to himself and his lifestyle. In his self-description, he explains that he is not prone to losing his temper, and that he "much more seldom indulge[s] in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outrages"(4). This can obviously be taken as his claim to be a peaceful, temperate man, but in "dangerous indignation," the source and solicitation of danger are unclear. The danger could be to others, in which case he could be saying that he is in fact a dangerous man to anger, which could be why he chooses not to lose his temper—he could be wary of putting himself into a situation where another would be harmed and he would be punished afterwards. On the other hand, the danger could be to himself, therefore he could be avoiding confrontation out of cowardice or fear of ostracizing himself. "Wrongs and outrages" is an especially ambiguous

reference, as they could be directed toward him or just a general wrong, such as one imposed on another or society itself. So though the first inclination would be to assume that he is saying that he is opposed to personal confrontation, he could actually be referring to his avoidance of any social responsibility whatsoever. Even the term “indulge” is questionable, as it is usually associated with doing something that one finds pleasurable. This brings us to question his relationship with Bartleby. He may be assuming the guise of compassion as a means of avoiding conflict with this man, attempting to spare this man the vengeance of his disapproval, or actually looking for ways to “indulge” in this behavior without endangering himself.

After a brief time in his employ, the narrator begins referring to Bartleby as an apparition” (16, 27), and most often uses the terms pallid and cadaverous in describing him. Though all the while describing his efforts to help this man, one cannot help but to wonder why these particular words are used. If Bartleby looked in any way cadaverous, one would think that is enough to imply that he may be dying and should have medical attention sought out on his behalf. Instead of doing this, the narrator allows Bartleby to slowly waste away in his chambers. While considering physically throwing Bartleby out of the office, he thinks to himself “you will not dishonor yourself by such cruelty? No, I will not, I cannot do that. Rather I would let him live and die here, and then mason up his remains in the wall” (27). Though it would initially seem in context that he is looking to appease Bartleby, he may be more concerned with the dishonor that would come from throwing a sick man into the street. Therefore, this can be taken to say that he would rather let Bartleby die and mason his remains in the wall than risk the exposure of his own callousness. When paying Bartleby his severance, he places the money “under a weight on the table” (22), which while appearing to keep the money in place could also be keeping a weakened Bartleby from taking it if the weight was too heavy. He does even at one point, while speaking

of how his pity of Bartleby was turning into revulsion, say “it rather proceeds from a certain hopelessness of remedying excessive and organic ill” (18). Organic is a term that means relating to the body or body organs. So here he does acknowledge that Bartleby may be physically sick, and instead of wanting to help him he is repulsed by it. When looking to remove Bartleby from the building where the narrator has abandoned him, the landlord of the building approaches Bartleby’s former employer for some assistance. “In vain I persisted that Bartleby was nothing to me—no more than to anyone else” (29) he explains, further showing us his disregard of Bartleby’s condition and efforts to relinquish any obligation to care for his fellow man. “Terrible retribution” (14) does come quite soon when he turns his back on Bartleby as he is sent off to the Tombs, a prison obviously nicknamed such because internment is its own death sentence.

While contemplating the melancholy (or guilt) he feels about Bartleby, the narrator remarks to himself that “both Bartleby and I were sons of Adam” (17). Now while this can be taken as a bond of brotherhood, one may also see it as a literal reference to the sons of Adam: Cain and Abel. Cain is responsible for his brother’s death, as the narrator can be seen as the catalyst for Bartleby’s. This is more evident when it is taken into account that he has earlier remarked “It cannot be thought of for a moment that Bartleby was an immoral person” (16). The narrator may be struggling with his desire to end innocent Bartleby’s life. He does later comment that “no man that I ever heard of committed a diabolical murder for sweet charity’s sake” (25). In this sentence it can be noted that he is alluding to himself when thinking of sweet charity, for that is what he believes he is giving Bartleby by appeasing him. He is also using the term diabolical, which is rooted in a word meaning devil. Quite soon after that, he has a revelation: “I penetrate to the predestinated purpose of my life. I am content. Others may have loftier parts to enact, but my mission in this world, Bartleby, is to furnish you with office room for such period as you may

see fit to remain.” (26) He does later in the story turn his back on this mission, which could be another way of him turning his back on the Lord as Cain did. Cain does ask the Lord “Am I my brother’s keeper?” (*King James Holy Bible* Gen. 4. 9), much as the narrator is asking himself that before Bartleby’s death. And the narrator deems himself “disqualified” (18) from churchgoing after seeing Bartleby in the office on Sunday. It is almost as if he is having a premonition earlier in the story when he remarks “I could not, for the very soul of me, avoid falling into sudden spasmodic passions with him” (15). It is said in a manner suggesting that he believes his soul is at stake.

Even when the most obvious interpretation of this is story reversed it contains a quite powerful and pertinent message of personal responsibility and of helping one’s fellow man. Melville gives us a strong vision of how a lack of compassion can be epidemic. While society can argue over who is responsible for their less fortunate, those that are being passed off are suffering. If our narrator had stopped trying to shift his brotherly duty off to other people or come up with reasons not to care, Bartleby may have been helped and his life saved. In some cases, such as this, it takes more effort to justify dismissal than to help one in need.

Works Cited