Bartleby Essay, Research Paper

Since he will not quit me, I must quit him.

?Ah Bartleby, Ah Humanity.? (Page 140, Herman Melville) This is the key to Bartleby, written by Herman Melville, for it indicates that Bartleby stands as a symbol for humanity. This in turn functions as a commentary on society and the working world, for Bartleby is a seemingly homeless, mentally disturbed scrivener who gives up on the prospect of living life. However, by doing so Bartleby is attempting to exercise his freewill, for he would ?prefer not to? work. His relationship to the narrator is thus significant, for as he attempts to exercise his freewill he is breaking from the will of the narrator and the normal progression of life. However, this attempt to exercise his freewill and break loose from the confines of typical societal functions, isolates Bartleby from society, which in turn places him in a state of depression and soon there after, death. Ultimately, by having Bartleby ?prefer not to,? Melville is commenting on the role of humanity in the work force. If man attempts to break free of his role and exercise his own freewill then he is severing himself from humanity which in turn will lead to depression and perhaps death, for he will have nothing but a wall always obstructing him.

From the beginning Bartleby is isolated within the confines of his work place. ?I procured a high green folding screen, which might entirely isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice.?( pg 111) In this quotation the narrator put

Arnold, Page 2

up a screen to separate his office from Bartleby?s, which isolates him from the other members of the staff which thus isolates him from humanity. However, this is not the end of the isolation for he is not only detached from those around him, but society as well. ?I placed his desk close up to a small side window, a window that had originally afforded a view of certain grimy backyards, but which commanded at present, no view at all. Within three feet of the pains was a wall.? (pg 110-111) This quotation demonstrates Bartleby?s total isolation from society, for even his window, usually a form of escape, traps Bartelby behind another wall, which thus reinforces absolute isolation. Ultimately, every aspect of Bartleby?s life further expounds upon the motif of solitude.

Bartalby?s attempt to exercise his freewill eventually leads him into an even more alienated state as he estranges himself from his coworkers and his boss, the narrator. This resulted from a refusal to follow the orders of the narrator, for he refused to work or even communicate with him. His only response soon became ?I would prefer not to,? which shows his lack of involvement and in turn his decision not to interact in society, for he gave up what little life he still had. Ultimately, what he was doing, was preferring not to live, but instead just exist. Melville, is thus commenting on the work force by demonstrating through Bartleby?s continual descend into the abysmal, society confines you behind walls and that if you give in and choose to stop living you will waste away as Bartleby did.

Consequently, Bartleby after having alienated himself so fully was then left to his own devices. ?Since he will not quit me, I must quit him. I will change my offices; I will move elsewhere.? (pg 132-133) He was deserted completely, for he was no longer living.

Arnold, Page 3

He continued to breathe, he continued to exist, but he was no longer of any use to society. As he severs himself from humanity, Bartleby is unaware of the consequences. However, these consequences as displayed by Melville, comment upon the impact that the work force can have upon mankind. Through Bartleby, he demonstrates that once you give up on life, everyone around will give up on you in turn, as the narrator did with Bartleby, for you have become an obstruction, much like the walls surrounding Bartleby.

In the end, his self-will was what led him to death. For his decision to withdraw from society and further seclude himself led to the disintegration of his soul. He lost all desire to work, or even function, ?I now recalled all the quiet mysteries, which I had, noted in the man. I remembered that he never spoke but to answer.?( pg. 106) He soon became a victim of society, loosing all initiative. Thus, ?for long periods he would stand looking out, at his pale window behind the screen, upon the dead brick wall,? (pg 126) and this became his life. He was trapped behind a brick wall and he soon became so disillusioned by it that he lost sight of life and gave up. Ultimately, his will to ?prefer not to? concluded in his death. Bartleby was imprisoned because of his desire to demonstrate his free will and never leave his office, even after it was no longer his place of employment. “And to you, this should not be so vile a place. Nothing reproachful attaches to you by being here. And see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass.”( pg 137) It is ironic that once he is actually confined within prison walls, that he is finally exposed to the outside world, the sky and grass.

Arnold, Page 4

It is even more ironic that once Bartleby is no longer restrained by society?s conformities that it is then that he dies. ?Strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up, his head touching the stones, I saw the wasted Bartleby.?( pg 139) Ultimately, once disillusioned by society and the work force, he died at his own free will because he ?preferred no to? live.

Bartleby?s character comments upon the functions of society and the work force. This story demonstrates that life if not lived is useless, as in the case of Bartleby, who wastes his away ?preferring not to.? Although, from the beginning he was isolated behind the green folding screen with nothing but a wall to stare out, he did not have to give up his humanity. However, he chose to, he chose to further isolate himself by his own self-will and accordingly it led to his death. ?It is dangerous to isolate oneself; dangerous for and individual and for a nation.? (Jawaharial Nehru) For in the end, isolation can drive a person insane, make him mute, or even kill him.

317