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Christen Dunn

Liberty University, cdunn24@liberty.edu

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Christen Dunn

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I Would Prefer Not to Help You

“I would prefer not to” (Melville 1335) is the last thing any employer wants to hear when he asks an employee to complete a task. This desire to not do what is asked of one is not a recent trend as it was present nearly 150 years ago in Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener.” Though Bartleby “prefer[s] not to” (Melville 1335) do a plethora of things, his boss always seemingly answers in a relatively kind way. However, the story of Bartleby is not just a story of one man’s sad decline. Recently, Nancy Goldfarb discussed “Bartleby, the Scrivener” as a social commentary on philanthropy in the 1850s. Her conclusions correctly show that the narrator uses his narration to clear his conscience of any guilt for Bartleby’s death, calls into question his relationship with God, and shows how the needy are not individuals but just an object to take care of, all of which help portray the common wealthy man of the 1850s.

Though at first the narrator may seem innocent in the downfall of Bartleby, Goldfarb begins by stating, “His narration is, to some extent, an expression of and means of coping with his guilty conscience on account of the part he played in Bartleby’s sad end. Representing himself as Bartleby’s benefactor assuages his conscience” (Goldfarb 240). The narrator takes pride in his generous actions, coming up with a perfect way to give Bartleby enough money so that he would never need to return. Before firing Bartleby, the narrator tries to ask about his past. He claims something came over him that would make him a “villain” (Melville 1343) should he just fire Bartleby at that moment. Yet when nothing comes of the conversation, he easily gives

up and offers Bartleby one more chance to do what he asked. At Bartleby's decision to continue not working, the narrator gives Bartleby six days and twenty dollars, thinking that will solve all his problems. However, the narrator never offers Bartleby psychological help, never invites him to church, and never tries to befriend him. He thinks money will solve the problem, yet it never does. After offering Bartleby money and that he could write should he need something in the future, the narrator applauds himself for his wonderful, faultless plan to convince Bartleby to leave the office. He continues to convince himself that his plan was the most peaceful and helpful way to rid himself of Bartleby (1346). He builds up his kind actions in his head, saying, "[t]he more I thought over my procedure the more I was charmed with it" (1346). The narrator believes offering money and future assistance is the best thing Bartleby could ever possibly receive, but this thought is used by the narrator only to later justify himself. Melville uses these examples as ways to show how people grant themselves false pride in their actions, thinking they have done all they can do, yet hardly scratching the surface of things they could have done.

Goldfarb also draws a connection to the narrator's inability to take care of Bartleby with the failure to connect with God, since the narrator is unable to go to church after he had seen Bartleby living in the office (250). While this statement is true, the narrator was never connected to God in the first place. The narrator seems to view church more as a task than a way to connect with God and other believers. The narrator "happened to go to Trinity Church" (Melville 1340) one morning because a highly acclaimed person was speaking. His use of the lackadaisical word "happen" (Melville 1340) suggests that it was convenient for him to go one morning, with an added bonus of a celebrity guest, so he just decided to go. Church was evidently not a normal part of his Sunday morning routine. Later, he states that he never made it to church because of the new knowledge of Bartleby's homelessness and how upset it made him feel. Christians in the

midst of finding someone in desperate need but having no idea how to help would hopefully turn to God for guidance, not completely turn around in the opposite direction and leave it upon themselves to try to fix it. Interestingly, throughout the story, the narrator uses “sons of Adam” (Melville 1341) to describe himself and his fellow man, suggesting at least some knowledge of God, but no real relationship. The narrator never was and probably ever will be in a relationship with God.

One of the final points Goldfarb makes about this social commentary is that people in need are not really viewed as people, rather just a way for the wealthy to build themselves up after helping them (Goldfarb 260). To begin, none of the original office workers are mentioned by their real names, rather their nicknames – two of which also happen to be food items. Though the names were chosen by the men themselves, this separation from humanity by the narrator shows his inability to truly connect with those working for him. Once Bartleby begins working for the narrator, he is sometimes referred to simply as “the scrivener” (Melville 1343), identifying him as his job title and taking away any individuality. None of the men in his office are wealthy. They each have assets, such as speed and professionalism, which are valuable to the narrator, so he does not dispose of them. However, the way the narrator describes their temperaments and “eccentricities” (Melville 1334), it is almost as if he is doing them a favor by allowing them to stay and continue their work. In fact, when Bartleby first refuses to do something the narrator asks, the narrator considers letting him go, yet decides not to, apparently out of the protection of Bartleby from falling in with a less reputable office. The narrator, though seemingly noble in his attempts to help his employees reach their full potential, really is gaining more than he is losing, so he keeps the would-be charity cases from being completely left alone.

This is a reflection on how people treat those who require a little help from others to survive – seemingly noble with truly selfish motivations.

Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener," though a sad tale of one man's demise, can also be viewed as a social commentary on the way people in that society viewed the poor. The rich were often disconnected from God and thus misunderstood the meaning and purpose behind offering charity to others. Though the narrator seems noble in his attempts to help Bartleby, ultimately his superficial attempts to help him were driven by selfishness and were unsuccessful. By identifying these important points, the critic shines light onto how "Bartleby, the Scrivener" was truly a commentary on nineteenth century philanthropy. The narrator makes Bartleby out to be the one who "prefers not to" do assigned tasks, yet, when given the chance to help the needy, the narrator prefers not to offer any sort of true compassion.

Works Cited

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