

A Marxist Reading of Melville's *Bartleby*

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ABSTRACT

Short Story as a genre of literature flourished more in America in the 19th century than any other country in the world. It became a national art form as almost all the important writers of the 19th century in America wrote short stories; many began their literary career as short story writers. But earlier writers such as Irving Washington and Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote allegorical stories, whereas Poe and Henry James relied on gothic elements for their writing. It was in the latter half of the 19th century that American writers came up with 'modern short stories' – stories that depicted ordinary man and his problems. Herman Melville in his famous short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" depicts how the capitalist system exploits an ordinary worker. The present paper tries to study the story from Marxist perspective; it shows how the social system is controlled and manipulated by the rich and powerful to exploit ordinary people for their benefit.

Keywords: Capitalism, Marxism, Exploitation, and Working Class

As the Russian short story develops in the 1830s, similarly around 1820s or 1830s, the Americans invented a literary form called the short story and several writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Stephen Crane and Henry James etc. devoted themselves in writing short stories along with writing novels. There are European predecessors to American short stories but there are also native influences on the genre. Along with the literary tradition, there are social and economic reasons for the development of the short story in

America. The scientific inventions and technological advances gave numerous new jobs to people; jobs that were unheard of. These people had little time to read longer works. They had 'short, stolen hours [from work] for the pleasures of mind'. Tocqueville rightly comments:

With but short time to spend on books they want it all to be profitable. They like books which are easily got and quickly read, requiring no learned research to understand them... What they want is vivid, lively emotions, sudden revelations, brilliant truths, or errors able to rouse them up and plunge them, almost by violence, into the middle of the subject... Short works will be commoner than long books, wit than erudition, imagination than depth. (Tocqueville, 608)

Among the important short story writers of the 19th century in America Herman Melville caught attention of many because of his style and subject of writing. The present paper discusses one of his famous short stories "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" from Marxist point of view.

Melville's stories such as *Benito Cereno* (1855) primarily deal with sea voyages. But in his some other stories Melville seems to be mainly concerned with the issues of poverty and racism. Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street", "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs" and "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" deal with the social change due to industrialism. Melville began writing stories for two magazines that were popular in his time – *Harper's Magazine* and *Putnam's Monthly*. "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" was first published in *Putnam's* in 1853.

In this story Melville's attacks the bourgeoisie, their methods of earning money, their treatment to the working class and the deplorable conditions of the working class in the mid-nineteenth century in America. The story is important as it shows Bartleby's abnormal behaviour and the opportunistic attitude of the lawyer or the narrator of the story. The narrator's attitude towards his workers is typical as that of a capitalist. The

narrator does not like Nippers because he is “ambitious” and does not want to remain as a “mere copyist” in life; he wants to climb higher on the social ladder. His ambition is seen as “diseased” by the narrator. He wants Nippers to stay at his office just as a clerk forever; any wish of progress and upliftment is considered as bad by him. Being a rich man, the lawyer helps the workers in his office in some way or the other. For example he gives his coat to Turkey because of his “small income”. When he realises that Bartleby does not have a house and he lives at the office itself after the office hours, he allows him to stay. He does help people but he feels that charity makes people insolent. For Turkey, he thinks, “He was a man whom prosperity harmed”. He is charitable to the people who are socially and economically below him. Anyone who tries to earn more money, the narrator seems to hate such people.

In “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” Melville portrays the cataclysmic or ruinous effects of capitalism on the working class. The story focuses the effects of industrialisation upon the individual worker; how the capitalistic system turns a human into a nonsensical babblers. The story is narrated by a lawyer who is an important character – the employer – who gives his point of view which is essentially the upper middle class’, the bourgeoisie’s point of view. In the story Bartleby appears to be insolent, almost an insane figure and a psychological pervert. He could be also seen as an eccentric man who just repeats “I would prefer not to” throughout the story. He speaks little, disobeys his master, rejects his orders and resists his opinions. Bartleby’s motives are not explained neither are they hinted at in the story. One wonders why Bartleby behaves like that, why does not he open up and expresses his grief, why does not he accept his master’s offers and live ordinarily. The refrain “I would prefer not to” haunts the employer throughout the story.

When the lawyer on a Sunday by a chance goes to his office does then realise that Bartleby has no home, he stays at the office therefore the employer always sees him first in the office and Bartleby is the last one to 'leave' the office. He feels unusual sadness when he sees Bartleby lying in the office. "For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized men... The scrivener's pale form appeared to me laid out, among uncaring strangers, in its shivering winding sheet". Why should he feel an unusual pity for Bartleby? Why does he consider him dead with nobody caring? It seems that the narrator does not take much effort to know about Bartleby. He asks Bartleby about his relatives and friends but when Bartleby refuses to speak the narrator stops the subject. By other means/ ways he never tries to get more information about him.

His belongings – the blacking box, the rugged towel etc. – mark his poverty. But the employer is struck more because of his solitude than his poverty! He fails to understand that his *poverty* is the cause of his solitude. The sentimental style of narration is a subtle trick used by Melville in the story to reveal hypocrisy of the upper middle-class. The story could be contextualised on two paradigms – employer/ employee and narrator/ subject. The narrator plays two roles in the story – the lawyer's (employer's) and the narrator's. There is another narrator – second narrator – in the story who appears in the end. He / she seems to be an omniscient narrator who gives a brief history of Bartleby in the story.

Slowly Bartleby shows resistance to capitalism. His rejection of his master's orders, his placid denial of work could be considered as the only way to renounce the conventional ways, the society and the bourgeoisie. Although the reason of his inability to work further is his failing eyesight, he answers the lawyer that even if his eyesight improves he "prefers" not to work anymore for the lawyer. It could be considered as the rebel of the working class against the bourgeoisie. His denial to work

is so soft but so full of confidence that the fellow workers in the office are influenced by him; they also start using – unconsciously – the word “prefer” in their speech. Bartleby’s words, actions appear to be absurd but Melville, it seems, suggests that absurdity is the only way tool remained with the working class against the bourgeoisie. James Baird in his review of *Melville’s Short Fiction* diagnoses Bartleby’s condition as schizophrenic.² But one could also see it as a critique of modern civilisation where one gets bored with mechanical nature of work in today’s capitalistic system from which any escape seems impossible; man feels entrapped in it where monotonous work is a necessity to earn money and livelihood. Bartleby’s job is to copy law papers, which was “a dry, husky sort of business”.

Bartleby’s is an example of a man who is caught in the rigidly structured economic world. The narrator’s style reveals him as a calculating and conservative person who does not allow anyone to invade his space and authority.

He also projects himself as a peace loving gentleman – “I seldom lose my temper; much more seldom indulge in dangerous indignation at wrongs and outages”. He is indeed gentle towards Bartleby as he does not drive him out even after he rejects to work for him. The Lawyer wants to know about Bartleby and wants to help him in every possible way. He could have handed Bartleby to Police when he denied leaving his office; leaving the Lawyer himself shifts his work place. He even goes to see Bartleby at prison and tries to make his stay comfortable there. All his attempts to bring Bartleby to ‘normality’ fail and the copy writer dies pathetically in the end. It appears that Bartleby by rejecting the lawyer’s orders, help and kindness takes revenge on the lawyer – on the bourgeoisie – for making his life a hell. Bartleby does not eat much; he survives on gingers bread which Ginger Nut brings for him. He never left his office and went for a walk or for save entertainment.

The narrator is shocked when Bartleby does not obey his orders. Bartleby continues to disobey but the narrator seems to be touched by his lack of passion, vigour, his mechanical responses and his calm, unaffected facial expressions. The narrator believes that, "there was something about Bartleby that not only strangely disarmed me, but, in a wonderful manner, touched and disconcerted me". The narrator does not hand over Bartleby to the police because he feels a kind of pride in helping a miserable, weird man. Bartleby appears lunatic towards the end of the story and the narrator consoles himself for helping an odd man. He is useful to me. I can get along with him. If I turn him away, the chances are he will fall in with some less indulgent employer, and then he will be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth miserably to starve. Yes. Here I can cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval. To befriend Bartleby; to humour in his strange wilfulness, will cost me little or nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience.

But is the narrator really helping Bartleby? Is he not being selfish in keeping Bartleby at his office? He realises that Bartleby will not "cost" him much and he can boast of his charity, kindness in public by letting Bartleby stay at his office. He must have thought that one day or the other Bartleby will himself leave the office and thus will free the master. The narrator does have a guilty conscience about his inability in helping his employee in a proper manner.

The word "pallid", which the narrator uses several times in the story to describe Bartleby, does not just mean pale in the story but acquires the connotative meaning of death.

To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succour, common sense bids the soul be rid of it. What I saw at that morning persuaded me that the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body; but

his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach.

It is the narrator who wants to be “rid of” Bartleby. But he wants to do it in a kind manner keeping his mask of a gentle master intact. Once he realises that Bartleby is no more useful or profitable for him, he plans to do away with him. When Bartleby denies leaving the office, the narrator decides to shift his office elsewhere. He does not want to use force while dealing with Bartleby as he wants his hands clean in the whole affair.

References to religion and Christian doctrines in the story play important role in understanding the narrator’s emotions and intentions. Bartleby’s case makes the narrator uncomfortable and he feels that “the things I had seen disqualified me for the time from church-going”. Does he have this feeling in his mind because he considers himself, in a way, responsible for Bartleby’s condition? At the end of the story there is a spiritual awakening for the narrator and he thinks that Bartleby has come to his life in order to teach him the doctrine of kindness, compassion and charity. He suffers because he thinks more about his professional reputation than the well-being of his office employee. He later tries to be friends with Bartleby and even offers him to bring him at his house. When Bartleby is dying, he touches him and it is the only time in the story when the narrator touches Bartleby. Symbolically it shows the disconnection among human beings in modern life.

One reason that the narrator finds about Bartleby’s strange behaviour is that he worked in the Dead Letter’s office in the past which must have made an impact on him. Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in the administration.... Dead Letters! Does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to a pallid hopelessness, can any business seem more fitted to

heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letters, and assorting them for the flames?

The narrator's encounter with Bartleby makes him a more compassionate person than he was earlier; he has developed empathy in the end. The last line in the story, "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" indicates that a sense of humanity is awakened in him.

The subtitle of the story "A story of Wall Street" implies the nature of "Wall Street" in America which is the symbol of wealth and capitalism. The narrator who seems to be an important personality in the business, despite his friendly manner fails to rise to the injunction of loving his worker as a human being.

Melville makes distinction between the poor in America and elsewhere such as in England. According to him American poor are not content by accepting charity and "they are sensitive to the disparity between their egalitarian ideals and their experience of the misery and infamy of poverty" (Rowland 69). Here, Melville contrasts the picture in England where the poor happily accept the charity but they also appear to be unhappy and angry with the circumstances. The story is highly topical as it addresses the then social problems in American society such as food, labour, accommodation, health and infant mortality.

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