

Spring 2015

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Laura Kaczmarczyk
College of DuPage

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Recommended Citation

Kaczmarczyk, Laura (2015) "Bartleby the Marxist," *ESSAI*: Vol. 13, Article 20.
Available at: <http://dc.cod.edu/essai/vol13/iss1/20>

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Bartleby the Marxist

by Laura Kaczmarczyk

(English 1102)

In the eyes of Karl Marx, a nineteenth century German economist and philosopher, the world can be categorized into two groups: the capitalists and the workers. This perspective emphasizes the class distinctions between the proverbial “haves” and “have-nots,” and calls for a restructuring of the economic system (capitalism) that flourished in Marx’s day, and continues to exist today. Interestingly, his American contemporary Herman Melville was expressing similar ideas in his writing. Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” is an exposition of the working man’s existence: oppression under the system of capitalism, in which he is alienated from his labor, offered only subsistence level wages, and is ultimately destroyed by the system if he cannot conform to it. Using a Marxist analysis of the story, one can come to understand the soul-crushing reality of the working conditions of mid-nineteenth century Wall Street, as represented by the titular character.

One of the main plot devices of the story is Bartleby’s incessant refusal to perform tasks that are part of his job as scrivener. Initially, he refuses the task of checking over the copies he or other scribes produce (Melville 331). Eventually, “he prefers not to” (Melville 331) do other things, including eating, which is the tool of his demise. From a Marxist perspective, what Bartleby refuses to do is the act of circulation; he refuses to become a machine. The machine-like work of the scrivener leaves Bartleby alienated from his work, thus he refuses more and more of the job. As author Naomi Reed explains in her Marxian critique of *Bartleby*, the character desires to break from the cycle of resignation and alienation through his refusals. He exposes the inequality between the lawyer-narrator and himself, as a relationship similar to that of the master and the slave (Reed 257-258). In Marxist philosophy, all social relations can be traced to an oppressor and the oppressed, as evidenced by history, and as written in Marx’s famous Communist Manifesto, in which he writes, “Freeman and slave, patrician and plebeian, lord and serf, guild-master and journeyman, in a word, oppressor and oppressed, stood in constant opposition to one another” (Marx 321). Bartleby embodies the figure of the oppressed in the story, whereas the narrator, the capitalist thriving on the work of his scribes, is his oppressor. Alienation from one’s labor is further explored by Melville in the form of Bartleby’s dead wall reveries, which symbolize his detachment from not only his work, but also from his humanity. After his initial devotion to work devolves, his physical appearance clearly shows his exhausted state. Literary critic Louise Barnett, in her essay on Melville’s “Bartleby”, writes, “When Bartleby refuses to do any work at all, he exhibits the mental and physical exhaustion characteristic of Marx’s alienated worker” (Barnett 324). As the working conditions of man worsen, and he is dehumanized into a fleshy machine, alienation from one’s labor becomes the sole escape of the ever-present depravity of life. Barnett describes this process as a body- and mind-destroying labor, which cannot be alleviated by finding a different job, as the lawyer suggests, due to the nature of capitalism (Barnett 324). Under the system of capitalism, the alienated worker will be alienated from any labor, whether it be the work of a scrivener, bartender, bill-collector, or any other menial wage-based job offered under the system.

Another main component of Marxism is the understanding that workers will not fight their oppressors if their wages reflect a comfortable lifestyle. In other words, earning above a subsistence level is a tolerable existence for the worker, so there is no reason for change. This can be seen in his compatriots’ work. Both Turkey and Nippers express their discontent with their livelihood throughout the workday, but quell their own resistance through various means. Turkey, an

Englishman finds his solace at the bottom of a bottle. After lunch, his drunkenness leads him to drip ink over the pages he copies, leaving blots (Melville 327). This can be a form of resistance by Turkey. In the most overt instance, Nippers, on the other hand, constantly adjusts the angle of his writing desk (Melville 328). Nippers displays irritability in the earlier part of the day, perhaps due to staying up late in the nights. As is mentioned in the text, Nippers is a political young man (Melville 328), and from his description, one can come to the conclusion that he attends political meetings. Still, he is also described as being neat, proper and dressed like a true gentleman, similarly to Bartleby (Melville 329). However, Bartleby's existence is not comfortable. He is a reflection of the vagrant masses in a society condemned by the capitalists, in which everyone is left to fend for themselves. Interestingly enough, Bartleby is not a reflection of the author. In fact, the character of Ginger Nut is Melville's place in the story. As explained by encyclopedist David Reynolds in his entry on Herman Melville's biography, Melville was born into an affluent family; the Melvilles experienced several periods of financial ruin, in which the children were tasked with finding odd jobs to help the family overcome these crises (Reynolds 1-5). Herman Melville, like Ginger Nut in the story, worked in a law office. Hence, he had first-hand experience of the reality of Wall Street and its capitalist foundations. As the center of commerce in America, it is plagued by the duality between wealth and poverty. These notions are further expressed in the differences between the lawyer and Bartleby, respectively. Furthermore, Reynolds mentions the depression of 1837, and its effect on the Melville family. He writes, "The great depression of 1837 sent the Melvilles into an economic tailspin from which they would not emerge for several years. To save money, they left Albany for the modest nearby village of Lansingburgh" (Reynolds 7). Herman would later pursue engineering with hopes of finding a job, with no such luck. His experience is typical of a downtrodden proletarian under the system of capitalism. Therefore, his writing in "Bartleby" takes on an atmosphere of resentment for the system.

To further analyze the context of Marxist analysis of "Bartleby", it is imperative to assess the oppressor of the story: the lawyer-narrator. Like the stereotypical bourgeois capitalist depicted by Karl Marx, the nameless narrator lives a life of unabashed luxury, relying on the work of his scribes, yet claiming all of the spoils. American educator and critic, Leo Marx, analyzes this character as a caricature of the mid-nineteenth century Wall Street big-wig. He assesses that his titles and promotions (i.e. Master in Chancery) garner him fame, as evidenced by his meeting of John Jacob Astor (Marx 328). Karl Marx often criticized the bourgeoisie for their acquisition of titles through capitalism. The narrator also has a typically bourgeois notion of perceived happiness and equity among his workers. He remarks of his goodwill and charity towards Bartleby even before the latter's degradation. Leo Marx further explains, "Bartleby impresses the lawyer with probably having 'been long famished for something to copy,'" (Marx 329). As Bartleby's sanity seems to slip, the narrator becomes conflicted due to his desire to maintain his business, and his wish to help Bartleby. (However, this sudden sense of altruism is ambiguous, due to the nature of capitalism.) Ultimately, pride and revenue become more important to the lawyer than his goodwill for Bartleby, a predictable outcome in the Marxist perspective, as shown by his relocation as a final means of forgetting his trouble with the titular character. His self-righteousness is once again seen when he tries to provide Bartleby with food in prison, which expresses only a surface-level act of charity. In the end, the narrator is unable to fully understand Bartleby's passive indignation and is haunted by it years after the death of Bartleby (Melville 349). The final line spoken by the narrator "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!" (Melville 351), is a reflection of his self-absorption, as he seems to come to a sudden realization of Bartleby's true intentions. However, this all-the-more proves that the narrator fails to see Bartleby as a protester of his unfortunate life, but rather as a martyr for a cause he cannot understand due to his place as the capitalist.

Though Herman Melville himself was not a Marxist, his short story "Bartleby the Scrivener" can be interpreted with a Marxist perspective and invites a deeper analysis of one's place under

capitalism. He presents Bartleby, the worker, as a man trapped, and ultimately broken by the system, thus solidifying his stance against the system as a whole. The story embodies the nature of the undermined individual under a system which exploits the masses. "Bartleby" is a warning for the readers of the pressures of conforming to capitalism and the resulting destruction of those who fail to do so. Only under a different economic situation can the Bartleby's of the world realize their full potentials, though the capitalists would prefer not to let a new system come about.

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