

RACE, CLASS, AND HERMAN MELVILLE:  
A STUDY OF  
"BARTLEBY THE SCRIVENER: A STORY OF WALL STREET"  
AND  
"BENITO CERENO"

By

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Master of Arts

In

The Department of English

School of Graduate Studies

Rhode Island College

2009

THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

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For Matthew

who's love, encouragement, and patience

helped to make this dream a reality

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## INTRODUCTION

## A STORY OF FAILURE AND SUCCESS

In this critical thesis I will be focusing my analysis on two of the short stories in Herman Melville's *The Piazza Tales*. The tales I have chosen to focus on are "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," (*Putnam's*, Nov., Dec., 1853) and "Benito Cereno" (*Putnam's*, Oct., Nov., Dec., 1855). I will argue that these two short stories by Melville—among others—represent a narrative discourse that is strikingly critical of the bourgeois class structure of American society that inform both Wall Street as well as the slave trade in mid-nineteenth-century America. Although criticism has emphasized the irony and ambiguity of these stories, I will argue that in "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno" Melville directly addresses the questions of hierarchical power and its pervasive presence and caustic effects in the dominant American culture of the mid-nineteenth-century (Kavanagh). In "Bartleby" Melville represents and criticizes hierarchical power in the workplace, and in "Benito Cereno" he criticizes its more pernicious effects in terms of racism and slavery in America. Although Melville criticizes the abuse of power inherent in American culture in these two stories, he does not resolve or present a solution to the situations he narrates. Rather, the radical ambiguity at the end of each story suggests Melville's hopelessness, or despair, for the future, informed by his own emotional and psychological situation which so deeply informs the "moral and epistemological uncertainty" of these works (Kavanagh 355).

Herman Melville was born in New York City on August 1, 1819, the third child of Allan and Maria Gansevoort Melvill. The day after Herman Melville's birth, in a letter to his brother-in-law Peter Gansevoort, Allan Melvill referred to his newborn son as

the “little Stranger.” This “little Stranger,” grew up in the shadow of his older brother Gansevoort who was favored by his parents. Herman, at an early age, sensed from his parents actions and comments that he was considered intellectually inferior and physically less graceful than his older brother Gansevoort. In an attempt to win his parents affection and admiration Melville began to assume a demeanor that was docile and amiable. Tyrus Hillway in *Herman Melville* writes,

Although his parents pretended to regard him during his childhood as ‘very backward in speech and somewhat slow in comprehension,’ Herman soon gave signs of ability in public speaking and eventually won recognition by being selected one of the monitors in the school. Nevertheless, his father, convinced that his possibilities for intellectual attainment were limited, marked him for commerce rather than for a profession. (30)

Although the Melvill’s were not considered extremely wealthy they led a very comfortable existence. By 1830 there were eight children in the Melvill household. Gansevoort (1815), Helen Maria (1817), Herman (1819), Augusta (1821), Allan (1823), Catherine (1825), Priscilla Frances (1827), and Thomas (1830). Herman Melvill began his formal education at the New-York Male High School in 1825 and continued as a student until 1830. Allan Melvill’s successful importing business, that secured his family’s financial position, began to fail due to America’s post-Civil War depression, and like many other businesses during this depressed economic time in America, Allan Melvill was forced to relinquish his business and claim bankruptcy when his creditors

instituted legal action against him on August 3, 1830. After several futile attempts to re-establish his business after the bankruptcy, and provide financial security for his family, Allan Melvill gave up his business and the fashionable home at 675 Broadway in New York City that his family enjoyed and had occupied since 1828. Moving forward he accepted a management position at a New York Fur company's branch in Albany, New York. After moving his family to Albany, New York his young son Herman was enrolled in the Albany Academy where he continued his education until his father's death on January 28, 1832. When Allan Melvill died he owed his father \$22,000.00 and his brother-in-law, Peter Gansevoort \$4,000.00. The Gansevoort's, under the circumstances, assumed all of Allan Melvill's financial obligations, began to guide and direct his eight children, and provided both financial and emotional support for Maria Gansevoort Melvill and her family. A few months after Allan Melvill's death Peter Gansevoort had the 'e' added to Melvill and the family name was then known as Melville.

Three vivid memories would remain with Melville for the rest of his life, the unwanted and terrifying memories that would surface in the writing of *Pierre* and *Redburn* as well as many of his other literary works. One was the memory of his father's financial difficulties.

On October 9 father and son (Herman) made their way to the harbor to board a boat for Albany. The journey was not a beginning but the end of Allan's dreams of independence. The father was as dependent as his son. Fifteen months later Herman saw his father stumble into the Albany home on a freezing December night,

flushed, trembling, almost starved—a physical wreck  
 after a frantic trip to New York in order to assuage  
 his creditors. (69)

Melville's second memory was of Allan Melvill's mental illness.

On January 10, 1832, Peter Gansevoort informed Allan's  
 older brother that 'yesterday he occasionally manifested  
 an alienation of mind. Last night he became much worse—  
 and today he presents the melancholy spectacle of a deranged  
 man.' Thomas came to Albany at once. He found Allan  
 'at times fierce, even *manical*....I *ought* not to hope.—for,— in  
 all human probability—he would live, a *Maniac!*'” (65)

The third memory was the sudden death of Melville's father in 1832, a memory that  
 would surface when he wrote *Redburn* and many of his other works.

Edwin Haviland Miller in *Melville: A Biography* quotes from *Redburn*,

“But I must not think,’ Wellingborough Redburn writes,  
 ‘of those delightful days before my father became a  
 bankrupt, and died, and we removed from the city;  
 for when I think of those days, something rises up  
 in my throat and almost strangles me.’ (70)

The traumatic experience of his father's death left young twelve-year-old  
 Melville with feelings of betrayal and abandonment, emotions that surfaced when writing  
*Redburn* as well as *White-Jacket*, *Moby-Dick* and “Bartleby.” In *White-Jacket* the  
 narrator White-Jacket always dates his life from age twelve, Ahab in *Moby-Dick* lost both



his parents before he is twelve months old, and in *Moby-Dick* when the *Pequod* meets the *Rachel* in open waters Captain Gardiner implores Ahab to help locate the lost boat that his twelve-year-old son is on. The errand boy Ginger-Nut in "Bartleby" is also twelve-years-old. This twelve-year-old mark that was so significant in Melville's life, when he suffered the loss of his own father, would continually surface in his literary work as he wrote and re-lived the painful memories of Allan Melvill's death, dark painful memories that would plague Melville throughout his life and literary career.

After his father's death Melville, no longer able to financially continue his education at the Albany Academy, began to seek employment at the tender age of thirteen. For the next two years Melville worked as a clerk in an Albany bank and in the spring of 1834 left that position to help his Uncle Thomas on his farm in Pittsfield, Massachusetts. In 1835 Melville, again wishing to continue his education, enrolled at the Albany Classical School that inevitably, in 1837, led to a teaching position at a school near Pittsfield. The Melville family at this point, due to the efforts of the two elder sons Gansevoort and Herman, were able to enjoy some of the long sought after financial security they had enjoyed when Allan Melvill was alive. This feeling of security however was short lived when Melville's brother Gansevoort, because of economic conditions, lost the fur business that his uncle Peter Gansevoort had financed him in after Allan Melvill's death. In April 1837 Gansevoort Melville claimed bankruptcy. After Herman Melville's brother Gansevoort's bankruptcy Maria Melville had no choice but to move her family from Albany to Lansingburgh, New York where they could survive on lesser income. It was here on May 4 and May 18, 1839 that Herman Melville's first literary composition, "Fragments from a Writing Desk," was published in the *Democratic*

*Press and Lansingburgh Advertiser*. The “power of blackness” that permeates the majority of Melville’s literary work begins with his first literary achievement, “Fragments.” In “Fragments” the narrator reports, “seeing in a dream ‘The Death Craft’ and ‘a human head’ covered with coagulated gore, and firmly gripping between its teeth, a rusty cutlass!” (69). Written seven years after his father’s death Melville, in “Fragments,” begins to vent his emotional anger, frustration, and disappointment towards his parents, emotions that had long lay dormant in his unhappy childhood. Melville was raised in a home dominated by the parental tyranny of a controlling mother and a father who, relying on his religious self-righteousness, never spared the rod when disciplining his children. In short, Melville was not raised in a demonstrative loving environment for Maria and Allan Melvill had long established, in their family, a parental hierarchy along with rules to protect and administer their authority. In creating this unloving atmosphere Melville’s parents in turn created anger and frustration in their children’s lives, and destroyed any loving relationship they might have experienced with them as they reached adulthood. The anger, frustration, and rejection Melville experienced as a child continually reconstructs itself in his fictional world, for with the exception of *Redburn* Melville always portrays an only child, usually an abandoned child (possibly himself), in many of his literary works. Seven years after writing “Fragments” Melville next literary accomplishment was *Typee* (1846) the first of his novels in the South Seas trilogy.

Not yet twenty-years-old and desperate to find a steady job to help support his nearly destitute family Melville shipped out as a crew member on the *St. Lawrence* that set out for Liverpool from New York harbor on June 5, 1839. It was his maiden maritime adventure and for the next four months Melville was to endure the brutal and harsh

existence of being a sailor. It was these brutal and harsh conditions aboard the *St. Lawrence* that Melville would write about in *Yellow-Jacket* and *Billy Budd*. Needless to say his maiden voyage aboard the *St. Lawrence* did not convince Melville to embark on a maritime career. Returning to Lansingburgh after the voyage on the *St. Lawrence* Melville took a teaching position at Schodack Academy in Greenbush, New York which helped contribute to the family's income. Before the end of May 1840 Schodack Academy closed for lack of money. Melville, again out of work, took a brief substitute teaching position at a school in Brunswick to help his family's financial situation. In June, 1840, desperate to find employment, Melville and his friend Eli Fly planned a trip to visit Melville's Uncle Thomas in Galena, Illinois and to explore any employment opportunities available there. The prospects of employment were disappointing and the two men decided to take an excursion up the Mississippi River before returning to New York. Although the trip was discouraging, the river excursion provided Melville with a setting for *The Confidence-Man* that he was to write later in his literary career. Melville, unable to find employment when he and Eli returned to New York from Illinois, decided to embark on his second maritime voyage as a crew member on the whaling ship *Acushnet* that was heading out of Fairhaven, Massachusetts to the South Seas.

Melville's sea adventures over the next four years provided him with the subject matter for the majority of his sea novels, especially the first three novels of his writing career and later on for the classic novel *Moby Dick* (1851). The first two novels in the South Seas trilogy, *Typee* (1846) and *Omoo* (1847) were so well received that Melville believed he would be able to support himself through his writing. He married Elizabeth Shaw in 1847 and continued to write. Melville's final novel, *Mardi* (1849), in the South

Seas trilogy was not well received by critics and readers of the nineteenth-century. Few critics praised *Mardi* and most considered Melville's third novel in the South Seas trilogy unacceptable in terms of what they had come to expect. Melville, in writing *Mardi*, did not achieve what he had set out to do. His dream was that *Mardi* would assure him of a permanent place in the literary world, one of recognition and acclaim as a great writer, and that *Mardi* would provide him with the financial security he needed to support his family. Unfortunately, the reading audience of the nineteenth-century was not receptive to *Mardi* and by the time of Melville's death in 1891, a mere 2,900 copies of *Mardi* had been sold. Critics and readers alike complained that *Mardi* was long and boring, a work that piled one episode upon another. Edwin Haviland Miller writes,

The plot is thin, at times lost in the verbiage; and the characters are verbal automations without hearts or complexity; the proliferation of episodes is often not justified organically. The flood of words is a form of artistic narcissism, as though Melville is pronouncing not only Lombardo but also himself a 'genius.' (142)

Some critics attribute the failure of *Mardi* to Melville's being influenced by his readings of Shakespeare and the Bible at this particular time in his life, which altered his writing in *Mardi* from his realistic adventures to a mixture of fiction with philosophy that marked the beginning of his existential crisis.

By 1856 Melville had written and had published ten books in eleven years plus uncollected tales and reviews, including a review of *Mosses From An Old Manse* by his friend Nathaniel Hawthorne. Elizabeth Melville, fearing that Melville would take a

nervous breakdown from fatigue borrowed a substantial loan against her inheritance from her father and sent her husband on his long desired trip to the Mediterranean and the Holy Land. Melville boarded the steamer *Glasgow* on October 11, 1856 and began his tour. After a stop in Glasgow and Edinburgh he visited his old friend Hawthorne in Liverpool, and upon leaving Liverpool left Hawthorne his newly completed manuscript of *The Confidence-Man* authorizing Hawthorne to arrange for the British publication of what was to be his last literary accomplishment. The British publishing firm Longman, Brown, Green, Longmans, and Roberts, through Hawthorne's efforts, published *The Confidence-Man*. One of the major themes in *The Confidence-Man* is the misanthropic theme of "Timonism," that became increasingly prominent in Melville's work as he struggled with what he felt was a betrayal and desertion by his public, friends, and family (39). Joseph Adamson in his work, *Melville, Shame, and the Evil Eye*, goes on to say,

The misanthropic response—the decision not to reestablish communion with others—is ultimately an expression of deep-seated resentment at some original, unforgivable injury, usually some form of mortifying betrayal or abandonment by others. Timonism in Melville, as Watson sees it, involves two diametrically opposed responses: either the injured party undertakes "a Misanthropic withdrawal into spiritual isolation" or he seeks revenge through a "cunning game of literary imposture" (175). The confidence man's use of imposture is a good example of the latter: he vindictively turns the tables on his victimizers, other human beings: he has been

betrayed, and so he betrays, by deceiving, those who have broken trust and deserted him. (39)

When Allan Melvill died he was a failure as a provider, a husband, and a father. Melville experienced embarrassment, ridicule, humiliation, and mortification when a child under his father's parental tyranny and when Allan Melvill died young Herman suffered from abandonment and betrayal. All of these negative emotions that Melville experienced throughout his young life were emotions that would become instrumental in shaping his adult life and his literary career. By using the game of literary imposture Melville seeks revenge for his failed childhood through his literary work, and as Adamson argues he has been betrayed, he has been deceived, and so he cunningly betrays and deceives in his writing. In *The Confidence Man* Melville satirically reeks havoc on two major targets, nineteenth-century optimism and liberal theology. Needless to say, *The Confidence-Man*, like its predecessor *Moby Dick*, was more favorably received by critics and readers in England than in America. Melville, after meeting with Hawthorne, continued on to Constantinople, Malta, Greece, Alexandria, Egypt, and the Holy Land.

In early January, 1857, Herman Melville's dream was realized when he began his tour of the Holy Land where he visited the biblical cities of Jericho, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, the Judean desert, and the Mar Saba Monastery in the mountains. Robert Milder in the essay "Herman Melville: 1819-1891, A Brief Biography" quotes from Melville's journal regarding Melville's impressions of the Holy Land.

No country will more quickly dissipate Romantic expectations than Palestine, he observed in his journal (WHM 15:91). Jerusalem, ruled by the declining Ottoman Empire and close to the nadir

of its fortunes, was shabby and venal, while the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (built around Jesus' tomb) was a sickening cheat (WHM 15:88). (41)

Midler goes on to say that, "In short, Melville found in Palestine precisely what he brought to it: a sense of the bankruptcy and blight of the Judeo-Christian tradition which at once deepened his skepticism and whetted his spiritual hunger" (41). When returning to America in May 1857 Melville, like *Bartleby*, would decide that he was "not going to write any more at present."

Twenty years after his memorable trip to the Holy Land Melville wrote the eighteen-thousand-line poem *Clarel* in which he documents his Holy Land experience. *Clarel* is a poem about a young man Clarel who searches, in his travels throughout the Holy Land, for the meaning of life in religion, science, and love. Clarel's search reveals that there is no certainty, but only uncertainty in the meaning of God's existence. Rebecca Stefoff in *Herman Melville* writes, "The poem's final verses express Melville's ultimate uncertainty about whether or not there is a God who gives meaning to the Universe." (127)

Yea, ape and angel, strife and old debate—  
 The harps of heaven and the dreary gongs of hell;  
 Science the feud can only aggravate—  
 No umpire she betwixt the chimes and knell:  
 The running battle of the star and clod  
 Shall run for ever—if there be no God. (127)

Herman Melville was raised in the Protestant religion as a child but as an adult had little or no use for religious inspiration. When writing *Clarel* Melville lived with religious skepticism believing that the age of miracles was long past and had been replaced by Darwin's theory of evolution. The poem reflects Melville's state of mind when living through the nineteenth-century crisis of belief in the faith of an almighty God who created the universe. *Clarel* is Melville's philosophical work that presents the contrast between the will of man to believe and the impulse towards skepticism. In other words *Clarel*, in Melville's terms, reflects the unresolved mysteries of faith and doubt. Again, short of funds, Melville accepted twelve hundred dollars from his brother-in-law Peter Gansevoort and had *Clarel* published in *Putnam's*. Gansevoort never lived to see *Clarel* published, for he died on the day the publication arrangements were concluded.

Upon returning from the Mediterranean and Holy Land tour, Melville learned that his publisher's Dix and Edwards in New York had gone out of business in 1857 due to the unstable economy in America. Now, without a publisher, Melville turned to the lecturing circuit. He lectured on his travels and adventures in the South Sea Islands and began writing verse that was to become his literary focus for the next thirty years.

When the Civil War began in 1861 Herman Melville attempted to enlist in the Union Navy but was rejected because of poor health. In 1863, along with his brother Allan, Melville obtained a United States government permit to visit the battlefields south of Washington, DC. At this time, concerned about what was happening between the North and South, Melville began writing poetry about the Civil War (1861-1865), poetry that depicted patriotic and military subjects. Melville's war poems, "The March to the Sea," "Gettysburg," and several others were published in several magazines, and in 1866



Melville's entire collection of war poems were published in a book titled *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War*. *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* was a failure and sold less than five hundred copies in eight years. This was the final blow to Melville's literary ego when his poetry about the Civil War, that was a concern to all Americans, was not well received. Critics attribute America's negative response to Melville's Civil War poetry due to his sympathetic feelings for the South in the poems.

In 1866 Melville was appointed an inspector in the New York Customhouse and from that point on he submerged himself in his family, his employment, and his poetry writing. In July, 1881 Melville, through the insistence of his wife Elizabeth, was placed in the care of a physician. He was diagnosed with an enlargement of the heart. Three years after his retirement from the New York Customhouse in 1888 the final attack came and ended Melville's life.

Several obituaries that appeared in newspapers after his death confirm that Herman Melville was not only a forgotten author, but also a forgotten man.

*The New York Times*, September, 1891.

Herman Melville (1819-1891). He won considerable fame as an author by the publication of a book in 1847 entitled 'Tepee'... This was his best work although he has written a number of other stories, which were published more for private than public circulation. (9)

*New York Daily Tribune*, September 19, 1891.

He won considerable fame as an author by the publication of a book in 1847 (actually 1846) entitled Typee... This was his best work, although he has since written a number of other stories, which were

published more for private than public circulation...During the ten years subsequent to the publication of this book he was employed at the NY Custom House. (2)

*The Press*, September 29, 1891.

Of late years Mr. Melville – probably because he had ceased his literary activity – has fallen into a literary decline, as a result of which his books are little known. Probably, if the truth were known even his own generation has long thought him dead, so quiet have been the later years of his life. (2)

After his death his achievements remained indeterminate to biographers or critics. Arthur Stedman was anxious to write Melville's biography after his death, but the writing of Melville's biography was promised to J.E.A. Smith by Elizabeth Melville. In 1897, fearing that Smith was too infirm to complete Melville's biography Elizabeth, using a posthumous collection of Smith's articles had a pamphlet printed of Melville's life for family and friends. Biographer Frank Jewett Mather, Jr., in 1902, unhurriedly began compiling Melville facts and data for a biography of the writer, but it was not until Elizabeth's death in 1906, fearing the loss of important documents regarding Melville's life and work, did Mather hasten to complete the task before him. If in fact Mather had indeed completed Melville's biography he would have portrayed the author as an entirely different personality than, as Leon Howard writes, "The mysterious individual who was to capture the imagination of a later generation" (339). That later generation would read Herman Melville's works not just as literature, but as historical literature of the

nineteenth-century. This later generation initiated the beginning of what is now known as the Melville revival.

Leon Howard summarizes the beginning of Melville's revival:

When Melville was finally revived in a number of articles published during the centennial year of his birth, he had become almost as inaccessible, biographically, as a literary figure of the seventeenth-century. His books seemed to be the major sources of information about him, and people could read them as they would. Some readers accepted their autobiographical implications with an unquestioning literalness which would have put new life in John Murray's Home and Colonial Library and made Melville a prosperous man had it been characteristic of his earlier readers. (340)

Recognized as a very minor figure in American Literature during his life, Melville was rediscovered when several biographies of his life and work began to surface after World War I (1914-1918). In 1921 Raymond Weaver wrote the biography, *Herman Melville: Man, Mariner, and Mystic* and three years later in 1924, using Melville's notes and manuscript, compiled and had published the novella *Billy Budd*. Other works contributing to Melville's revival were Carl Van Doren's, *The American Novel* (1921), D.H. Lawrence's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923), and Lewis Mumford's biography, *Herman Melville: A Study of His Life and Work* (1929).

Giles Gunn in the introduction of *A Historical Guide to Herman Melville* documents the Melville revival in three stages. The first stage, in 1921, began with Raymond Weaver's work. Gunn writes:

A biography that had originally been commissioned as an article for the *Nation* but turned into something more as Weaver warmed to his subject, it initiated the first phase of a Melville revival that was to pass, during the rest of the twentieth century, through several additional distinct moments. (9-10)

The second phase of the Melville revival surfaced in the 1940's, 1950's, and 1960's initiated by historians of American Literary and cultural history. Gunn continues:

To them—F.O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, C.L.R. James, Henry Nash Smith, Harry Levin, Leslie Fiedler, Leo Marx, Daniel Hoffman, and others—Melville's art not only provided insights into a world grown treacherous, ambiguous, unstable, brutal, and unjust but also offered, through the variety of discourses it seemed prepared to engage—psychological, mythic, ideological, social, ethical, epistemological, linguistic, metaphysical—a set of strategies for coping with, even successfully surviving, such a world. (10-11)

The third phase, in the 1980's and 1990's, critics and historians based their writing on the manner in which Melville's literary works addressed the specific issues of race, gender, sexuality, nationalism, and class. Issues that were predominant in the nineteenth-century as well as now, issues that with close reading are constantly reflected in Melville's fiction and poetry.

Lucy Maddox writes of Melville in *Removals: Nineteenth-Century American Literature and the Politics of Indian Affairs*. She says that

the plot that seems to have fascinated Melville most, the one he kept

rewriting and revising, is an account of the confident white American's unsettling encounter with the silent other, the representative of a world that lies beyond the limits of the American's own discourse. In Melville's plot, the American must work to turn this other into "a beautiful blank" for the inscription of his particular discourse, if he is not to be completely undermined; when the other resists, then he must be removed, exterminated, or both. In the responses of Melville's Americans, then, the other is given two familiar alternatives: to be civilized—through incorporation (or translation) into the American discourse—or to become extinct—through exclusion from it. (53)

Maddox directly references the nineteenth-century Removal Act regarding the atrocities inflicted on Native Americans, and uses this to pick up on the parallel exploitative situations that Melville writes of in *Yellow-Jacket*, *The Confidence Man*, *Typee*, "Bartleby the Scrivener," *Pierre*, "Benito Cereno," and *Moby Dick*. In these and other works Melville's message is quite clear. Anyone who lives in America and is considered a citizen of America shall, and will, submit to the laws of the dominant white American-centered discourse or, as Maddox writes, "become extinct—through exclusion from it."

One definitive example of this "extinct through exclusion" is in the novel *White-Jacket* by Melville. In the chapter titled "The Great Massacre of the Beards" Captain Claret orders the sailors to shave their beards because it is against Navy regulations and Navy law, a law that states that all sailors must be clean-shaven, beards were not allowed. "A pretty set of savages, thought he, am I taking home to America; people will think them all catamounts and Turks. Besides, now that I think of it, it's against the law. It

will never do. They must be shaven and shorn—that's flat" (365). Melville's narrator White-Jacket sums up the barbaric act of Captain Claret's flogging of John Ushant, because Ushant would not shave his beard, as: "What he was, the usages of the Navy had made him" (376).

In *Yellow-Jacket*, "Bartleby," "Benito Cereno," and many of Melville's other works a critic or reader can detect Melville's outrage towards white hierarchical power, power that abuses, condemns, and demeans the military, the working class, and promotes slavery. Melville was a very angry author who was disenchanted with the American process and, like Bartleby, preferred to exit into a world that was void of hierarchical power, criticism, and rejection. Andrew Delbanco in his work, *Melville: His World and Work*, writes, "He wrote about 'isolates' who barricade themselves against the gadding world and live alone with their demons and dreams" (xxii).

In "Bartleby the Scrivener," Bartleby is deprived of his right of freewill because he does not succumb to the hierarchical demands of the narrator-lawyer. "Prefer not to," echoed I, rising in high excitement, and crossing the room with a stride. "What do you mean? Are you moon-struck? I want you to help me compare this sheet here—take it," and I thrust it towards him (47).

It appears that the lawyer hires Bartleby as a scrivener however, this quote tells us this was not the only reason why Bartleby was hired. "One object I had, in placing Bartleby so handy to me behind the screen, was to avail myself of his services on such trivial occasions" (47). The lawyer's intent is to call on Bartleby for any trivial service that the lawyer deems necessary and fancies that Bartleby's use will extend well beyond the duties of a scrivener. He calls on Bartleby several times throughout the short story to,

“examine a small paper with him,”---“The copies, the copies, said I, hurriedly. We are going to examine them”---“Bartleby, said I, when those papers are all copied, I will compare them with you”---“Ginger Nut is away; just step around to the Post Office, won’t you and see if there is anything for me”---“Go to the next room, and tell Nippers to come to me” (51-2). Of course, Bartleby “prefers not to” acknowledge the lawyer’s menial requests and in response to Bartleby’s continuous reply of “I prefer not to” the lawyer reacts, not as a benevolent employer, but as an employer who constantly exercises his hierarchical power over his employees.

I staggered to my desk, and sat there in a deep study. My blind inveteracy returned. Was there any other thing in which I could procure myself to be ignominiously repulsed by this lean, penniless wight?—my hired clerk. What added thing is there, perfectly reasonable, that he will be sure to refuse to do? (52).

Melville’s lawyer, like Melville’s privileged critics and readers in the nineteenth-century, exercises the pattern of domination and subordination that is based on America’s economic power system. Bartleby, like Melville, cannot be successful in America’s system of societal norms, because the notion of the lawyer’s hierarchical power in “Bartleby” is based on his wealth, class, and his measure of success. Melville was not wealthy or successful at this point in his life and he does not portray his characterization of Bartleby as wealthy or successful. However, while Melville does not criticize the lawyer’s class, wealth, or success in the short story, he does place the blame on the lawyer for his insensitive conduct towards Bartleby, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger-Nut and on the systemic forces in America’s society that have shaped the lawyer’s

presupposed conception of privilege and power. The lawyer calls Bartleby a, “lean, penniless wight—my hired clerk” (52). In other words, Bartleby has no rights in the American system that defines the division of classes, enforces the division of labor, and encourages hierarchical power in the workplace. Bartleby is just that, a hired clerk as Melville was a writer out for hire who would eventually succumb to the literary tastes of America’s privileged critics and readers in order to support his family. This directly supports my argument that Melville, who was experiencing financial difficulties in his private life and his literary career, was critical of the bourgeois class structure of American society and that, through the characterizations of Bartleby and the lawyer, Melville hoped to expose the injustices that were being tolerated by the working class in order to gain employment.

Several articles in the *New York Times* provide evidence regarding the division of labor in the workplace in nineteenth-century America, and the power that the wealthy class believed they possessed. One article in the *New York Times*, “The Rationale of Strikes,” was published on April 18, 1853. It is, as the title suggests, about workmen in the New York area who are trying to organize a union for better working conditions and higher salaries. The article states, “He unites with his fellows because his assertions would otherwise be fruitless,” and further, a second line corresponds to Melville’s personal views: “Wealth is much better enabled to contend against high wages, than the comparative poverty of the working classes to stand out for an advance.”

After the disappointing reception of *Moby Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852) Melville was acutely aware of the efforts to rectify social injustice in New York City. In 1850 underpaid and overworked lower class Americans were staging mass meetings, parades,



rallies, demonstrations, and strikes to voice their dissatisfaction with the nation's economic practice. He was also aware of the racial discrimination imposed on the black working class in America who, because of being historically stereotyped as inferior and beneath the white lower class, were subjected to accepting the most menial, low-paying employment available. Melville's literary work represents an author who was deeply concerned with the issues of industrial capitalism, the evils of slavery, the oppression of women, hierarchal power, and class division.

In the second chapter of this thesis, "America's Original Sin: Herman Melville, Slavery, and 'Benito Cereno'" my critical analysis will be to focus on Melville's deliberate denouncement of the American Captain's stereotypical attitude towards Babo and the numerous other black slaves aboard the Spanish vessel *San Dominick*. "Benito Cereno" reflects the raw and gruesome side of men in one respect, but thematically also reflects the intelligence of the black man in contrast to the naïve privileged white man who considers himself far superior to black men. "In fact, like most men of a good, blithe heart, Captain Delano took to Negroes, not philanthropically, but genially, just as other men to Newfoundland dogs" (279). Melville's characterization of Captain Amasa Delano, who is completely oblivious to the fact that there is a mutiny in place, is the perfect example of the superior intellectual confidence that white men in the nineteenth-century believed they possessed. He is Melville's object of satire in this short story that exposes the white man's naïve attitude that a black man would never attempt to, or actually succeed in, overpowering a white man's domain, in this case the *San Dominick*. Grejda writes that Captain Delano is,..."what [critic] Charles I. Glicksberg calls 'a composite reflection of the righteous stereotyped attitudes prevalent at the time'" (89).

Editor Warner Berthoff in *Great Short Works of Herman Melville* writes the following regarding “Benito Cereno.”

There have been extreme differences of opinion about the artistic merits of this long story, as well as about its philosophical meaning, its bearing—as a work of the 1850’s—on the slavery crisis, and even so basic a matter as the author’s attitude (forgiving? patronizing? contemptuous or worse?) toward the right-thinking American captain through whose eyes and shifting impressions the circumstances of action are given to us. (238)

Melville’s fictional world reflects both mentally scarred and physically dismembered characters, a world that Melville himself was experiencing in 1851. In less than five months he had completed two lengthy novels, *Redburn* (1849) and *White-Jacket* (1850). Edwin Haviland Miller in *Melville: A Biography*, writes: “After reading a flattering review of *Redburn* in *Blackwood’s Magazine*, Melville commented in his Journal on November 6, “It’s very comical—seemed so, at least, as I had to hurry over it—in treating the thing as real. But the wonder is that the old Tory should waste so many pages upon a thing, which I, the author, know to be trash, & wrote it to buy some tobacco with” (151). Obviously Melville did not have much literary conviction in *Redburn* and *White-Jacket* but had, in writing them, succumbed to the literary tastes of both American critics and American readers. The reception of *The Whale*, published in England on October 18, 1851 and as *Moby Dick* in America on November 14, 1851 was disappointing. The reception of *Pierre* published in 1852 was catastrophic. In an attempt

to recoup his literary career and support his family Melville, in 1853, turned to magazine writing. Again in his literary career Melville changed the subject matter in the collection of short stories in the now famous *Piazza Tales*. He sought to eliminate the spacious action that dominates his earlier works by setting these short, allegorical stories in close and oppressive settings. The magazine pieces, which include the two short stories I am focusing on, “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” and “Benito Cereno” brought Melville a small measure of recognition as an author, but did not generate enough confidence in Melville to balance the public’s rejection of *Moby Dick* and *Pierre*.

Robert Midler categorizes Melville’s literary career into three acts. In the first act came *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Mardi* (1849), *Redburn* (1849), *White-Jacket* (1850), *Moby Dick* (1851), *Pierre* (1852), *The Magazine Pieces* (1853-1856), *Israel Potter* (1855), and *The Confidence Man* (1857). Then as Midler writes, “And finally silence” (18). Melville’s second act surfaces with the verse collection *Battle-Pieces and Aspects of the War* (1866) and the poem *Clarel* (1876). When retiring from the New York Customs House in 1885 Melville’s third act included *John Marr and Other Sailors* (1888), *Timoleon* (1891), *Weeds and Wildings Chiefly: With a Rose or Two* (post. 1924), and *Billy Budd* (post. 1924; standard edition 1962).

Fifty-six years after his death the Melville Society, established in 1947, is one of the largest international single-author societies with over seven hundred individual and institutional members. It is a non-profit organization that strives to facilitate and enhance interaction throughout the world concerning the life, associates, works, reputation, and influence of nineteenth-century American novelist and poet Herman Melville. Although largely academic in its origin the Melville Society embraces all readers of Melville. The

Society's editorial office, located at Hofstra University, publishes *Leviathan: A Journal of Melville Studies*. The Melville Society and the journal *Leviathan* are unique in that they represent a continuing tribute to the nineteenth-century American author Herman Melville who was not recognized as an accomplished and widely read author during his twelve year literary career.

The emotional toll of his literary failure informs his short fiction. In this critical thesis I will argue and provide evidence from the texts that Melville's characterization of Bartleby and Babo are representative of a world that lives beyond the limits of American discourse. Both characters being contrary to what was expected of them were exterminated by the hierarchical power that controlled American ideology as Melville became extinct through exclusion as an accepted and successful American writer. Therefore, I believe that one cannot only observe Bartleby through the narrator-lawyer's view or Babo through Benito Cereno's and Captain Delano's view, but a reader would have to define what Melville's characterizations of these individual characters represented to the author in the larger picture of American ideology in the nineteenth-century.

## CHAPTER I

## THE "BARTLEBY" INDUSTRY

In 1853, between the publication of *Pierre* and *Israel Potter*, Melville, seeking a steady income to support his growing family, turned to a different reading audience by writing shorter works for literary magazines. Melville realized that in writing a short story, because of the limited space, the author had to be very selective when forming the characterizations and dialogue in the story. Only this method of disciplined narration could take the story to its climax. Melville, in "Bartleby," focuses the story on one central action, the conflict between the lawyer and Bartleby. He begins the short story with an exposition when Melville has the narrator lawyer disclose, in the first seven pages of the short story, who he is, where his office is, and who he employs. The exposition is then followed by a complication, a bump in the lawyer's life, when Bartleby "prefers not to" do any more copying. Melville takes the confrontation between the lawyer and Bartleby one step further, and has the conflict accelerate into a crisis. The crisis turns into a decision, by the lawyer, to move his office to another location and assumes that this will release him of his Bartleby responsibility. Unfortunately this does not work. The lawyer continues to bear the responsibility of Bartleby for Bartleby has become a nuisance to the new tenants at No\_\_ Wall Street. The story climaxes with Bartleby's incarceration and death. Sheila Post in "Melville and the Marketplace" writes:

During the 1840's and 1850's, prominent writers such as Caroline Chesebro' (Maria Jane McIntosh), Fanny Fern (Sara Payson Willis Parton), Fanny Forrester (Emily Chubbuck Judson), Nathaniel Hawthorne, Caroline Lee Hentz,

Herman Melville, Edgar Allan Poe, Catharine Sedgwick,  
 Elizabeth Barstow Stoddard, E.D.E.N. Southworth, Harriet  
 Beecher Stowe, Walt(er) Whitman, and N.P. Willis established  
 their careers by contributing to the magazines. (116)

Melville found that periodical writing for *Harper's Magazine* and *Putnam's Monthly* was more critically receptive and economically rewarding than the book market. However, he did not have the literary freedom in magazine writing that he had enjoyed in book writing and had to conform his writing to the demands of *Harper's* editorials. Harper Brothers started *Harper's Magazine* in June 1850 and within a period of two years, by heavily advertising its editorial policies and targeting both middle and working-class readers, the magazine's circulation quickly rose to more than 400,000 readers weekly. *Harper's* maintained strict editorial demands on its writers to write stories that maintained a nonpartisan position on politics, social issues, and religious topics. In other words, *Harper's* demanded light literature targeted towards parlor readers. Incredibly, Herman Melville submitted and had published seven tales, "The Fiddler," "Jimmy Rose," "Cock-a-Doodle-Do!" "The Paradise of Bachelors," "The Tartarus of Maids," "Poor Man's Pudding and Rich Man's Crumbs," and "The Happy Failure," to the most political conservative and sentimental monthly, *Harper's Magazine*. Bruce Franklin in the essay "Herman Melville: Artist of the Worker's World" writes, "these are trick stories, with hidden meanings intended to expose the unwitting polite readers of *Harper's*. They display Melville's view of the two main classes in capitalist society, the working class and the owning class, in the form of a grotesque sexual allegory" (297). At first glance the tales appear to be in tune with *Harper's* editorial policies and magazine practices, but

at the same time reflect Melville's point of view on the themes of social alienation and obscurity. Living in a world that perceived social reality in terms of class contradictions Melville, in these short stories, hoped to expose the essence of capitalist America. He saw America's social structure through the eyes of a man who could not, and would not, become part of the social world of the petty-bourgeois inhabitants of nineteenth-century America. After the failure of *Pierre*, and suffering rejection, he was deserted and criticized by not only the ruthless critics of the time but by those he had considered friends in New York's literary circle. Quite aware of his alienation from the academic world of higher education, he lived in the world of reality; a world that socially and economically repressed the oppressed and exploited working class in America. Melville does not condemn all of human society, but identifies and condemns the capitalistic society that rejected his literary work and drove him into social alienation and obscurity. Melville's real world was shaped not only by his imagination but also by his work experience throughout his life. Two of the short stories, "The Paradise of Bachelors," and "The Tartarus of Maids," published anonymously in the April, 1855 issue of *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, are so obviously contradictory of *Harper's* policies it is a wonder that they were even published. However, Melville, in the pair of sketches uses imagery to cunningly expose the victimization of machine-age industrial capitalism. The setting in "Tartarus," as the narrator proceeds on his journey to the paper factory, indicates the despair and doom that Melville portrays in the short story. The narrator who, like Melville, has to conform to a capitalist society in order to make a living, passes "The Mad Maid's Bellowspipe," enters "A Dantean Gateway," passes by a body of water

called “Blood River,” and eventually gets to the factory in the “Devil’s Dungeon,” and there Bruce Franklin writes he finds,

Machinery—that vaunted slave of humanity—here  
stood menially served by human beings, who served  
mutely and cringingly as the slave serves the Sultan.  
The girls did not so much seem accessory wheels to  
the general machinery as mere cogs to the wheel. (298)

The archetypal Satanic capitalist is the creator of wage slavery that uses human beings to enrich the production that serves to promote more riches for the rich. Melville has the girls in the paper factory suffer from the same isolation and passive resistance that Melville himself was suffering from when writing “Bartleby.” The lawyer in “Bartleby” is the recipient of the mechanical maid’s labor. They produce the paper that in one sense allows Bartleby, who is second in the chain of slave labor, to copy documents that produce more profits for the lawyer. David Kuebrich, in the essay “Melville’s Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in ‘Bartleby,’” quotes Daniel Raymond on this point:

Wealth is power, and the more unequally property is divided, the greater will be the power of one class of citizens over the destinies of another, and usually the larger class. This creates personal dependence, and produces to a certain extent, the condition, if not physically, at least morally, of lord and vassal, master and slave. (388)

Critical and scholarly essays have pointed out that Melville’s characterization of the lawyer, who enjoys the comforts of his middle-class lifestyle, is the example of an



employer who is blind to the emotional conditions of his employees. Melville emphasizes the lawyer's blindness of his actions towards his employees when Bartleby refuses to do anymore writing and the lawyer ask, "Why, how now? What next?" exclaimed I, 'do no more writing?'" Bartleby answers, "No more." The lawyer demands a reason, "And what is the reason?" Melville has Bartleby philosophically answer, "Do you not see the reason for yourself?" (59). 'See' is the key word in this exchange between the lawyer and Bartleby for the lawyer is blind in recognizing that Bartleby's passive resistance is the scrivener's only defense mechanism against the lawyer's demeaning treatment. Bartleby's refusal to work is indicative of the unequal and exploitative working conditions that prompted the mass meetings, parades, rallies, demonstrations, and strikes by the working-class that were taking place in New York during the pre-Civil War period.

When the narrator in the "The Tartarus of Maids," finds out that "Old Bach," the owner of the factory is a bachelor, his memory reverts back to bachelorhood and the subject of the first sketch "The Paradise of Bachelors," where Melville again uses setting to describe and condemn, in this sketch, the capitalist society in London. The tale takes place in the "Temple Bar" where a group of nine well-to-do bachelors reach the bar by way of a street "Soiled with the mud of Fleet Street' and 'glide down a dim, monastic way, flanked by dark, sedate, and solemn piles'" (298). Franklin writes that Melville's descriptive language is exactly what he thought of these men of wealth. They were, "A morbid dilatation of the veins of the lower rectum" (298-9).

For these men of wealth, pain and trouble simply do not exist:

The thing called pain, the bugbear styled trouble—those two

legends seemed preposterous to their bachelor imaginations.

How could men of liberal sense, ripe scholarship in the world, and capacious philosophical and convivial understandings—how could they suffer themselves to be imposed upon by such monkish fables? Pain! Trouble! As well talk of Catholic miracles.

No such thing.—Pass the sherry, sir.—Pooh, pooh! Can't be! (299)

Melville's narrator in "Bartleby" is also a bachelor who, like the bachelors in "The Paradise of Bachelors," reflects the emotionally sterile world of capitalism. Melville describes the narrator as, "One of those un-ambitious lawyers who never address a jury, or in any way draw down public applause; but, in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat, do a snug business among rich men's bonds, and mortgages, and title-deeds. All who know me, consider me an eminently safe man" (40). Melville, in "Bartleby," characterizes the lawyer as safe in his snug retreat for, as owner and employer of No\_\_ Wall Street, he has created a division in his office by the use of ground-glass folding-doors to isolate his employees from himself. David Kuebrich writes, "Attention to the Wall Street setting and the sharp class divisions in the workplace clarify the symbolic function of the story's omnipresent physical barriers: the prison walls, the tall brick structures that surround the law office, and the folding glass doors and portable screen that divide it internally" (386). The short story serves Melville's objective to subversively expose, through the setting of Wall Street and the characterization of the lawyer and Bartleby, America's class division and its un-justice economic practices.

*Putnam's Monthly* was established in 1853 and was a magazine that offered editorialized critical commentary on national and international affairs. *Putnam's* anti-

sentimental stance was in direct opposition to *Harper's* policies and gave Melville the opportunity to include political, social, and aesthetic themes in the short stories he wrote for *Putnam's*. "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," "Benito Cereno," "I and My Chimney," "The Bell-Tower," and "The Encantadas" were written by Melville and published by *Putnam's Monthly*. Never before in his literary career had Melville experienced such an overwhelming acceptance of his literary endeavors. Sheila Post writes, "Melville's tales became so popular with *Putnam's* readers that the author's work became the trademark for the magazine" (120). "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" was published in *Putnam's Monthly* in their 1853 November and December issues. On January 19, 1856 Melville informed his publishers that he had written a book that combined five of the short stories he had written for *Putnam's Monthly*, "Benito Cereno," "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street," "The Bell-Tower," "The Encantadas," and "The Lightning-Rod Man." He would title the collection *Benito Cereno & Other Sketches*. On February 16, 1856 Melville again wrote his publishers, Dix and Edwards, to inform them that he had changed the title to *The Piazza Tales* after the sketch that was to open the book.

Since the Melville revival there has been more critical attention given to "Bartleby The Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" than any other of Melville's short stories because of its symbolic suggestiveness and narrative ambiguity. However, the story, like its author, remains an enigma. As Lewis Leary wrote, "'Bartleby's' charm resides in what Melville preferred not to reveal, so that no one key opens it to a simple, or single, or precise meaning."

Dan Mc Call, the author of *The Silence of Bartleby*, writes, "'Bartleby' is a masterpiece by our most powerful writer, a central text in what we have come to call the American Renaissance, one of the very finest works of short fiction in our literature" (x). I agree with Mc Call, however I feel as though the analysis of "Bartleby" has been cut up into little portions to accommodate the many scholarly and critical interpretations of the short story, or as Mc Call puts it, "After decades of extremely productive work, 'The Bartleby Industry' has put us in a rather peculiar position: the more we see of what went into the story, the less we understand the story itself" (9). "Bartleby" is, by far, the most critically interpreted short story in American nineteenth-century literature, and although each critical interpretation seems, to the critics who have dissected "Bartleby," to be the correct critical interpretation there remains the question Mc Call poses, "how far and to what purpose does this extensive analysis take us?" (9).

I will not include all of the many critical and scholarly interpretations of "Bartleby" in this paper, but will however comment on "Bartleby's" origin, several representative interpretations of "Bartleby," and will then focus on the scholarly work relating to "Bartleby" by historians of American literary and cultural history.

Critical views of "Bartleby's" origin, as well as the meaning in the short story have stirred controversy. The first and foremost opinion is that Melville, famous for his borrowing, blatantly or subversively, from other authors conceived "Bartleby" from a full-page article, written anonymously, in the *New York Times* and the *New York Tribune* on February 18, 1853. The article, discovered by Johannes Dietrich Bergman, titled "The Lawyer's Story; or the Wrongs of the Orphans. By a Member of the Bar," is cited as one possible source. The newspaper article is the first chapter of a novel, and subsequent

chapters were published in the *Sunday Dispatch* until May 29, 1853. Although “The Lawyer’s Story” was originally published in several newspapers as a serial, H. Long & Brother, in 1853, published the serial as a book written by an anonymous author. In fact, the author was James A. Maitland an accomplished writer of novels. The newspaper article of “The Lawyer’s Story” was published on February 18, 1853. The first installment of “Bartleby” was published in *Putnam’s Monthly* in the November, 1853 issue. It could very well be a coincidence that both tales were published in the same year, however critical analysis has noted several similarities that are too obvious to ignore between “The Lawyer’s Story” and “Bartleby.” One is the controversial first paragraph of each tale. Mc Call writes that, “I think anyone who has read “Bartleby” carefully will tremble a little when reading the first sentence of the newspaper story:”

In the summer of 1843, having an extraordinary quantity of deeds to copy, I engaged, temporarily an extra copying clerk, who interested me considerably of his modest, quiet, gentlemanly demeanor, and his intense application to his duties (2).

The first chapter of Melville’s “Bartleby” reads:

I am a rather elderly man. The nature of my avocations, for the last thirty years, has brought me into more than ordinary contact with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men, of whom, as yet, nothing, that I know of, has ever been written—I mean, the law-copyists, or scriveners. I have known very many of them, professionally

and privately, and, if I pleased, could relate divers histories, at which good-natured gentlemen might smile, and sentimental souls might weep. But I waive the biographies of all other scriveners, for a few passages in the life of Bartleby, who was a scrivener, the strangest I ever saw, or heard of. While, of other law-copyists, I might write the complete life, of Bartleby nothing exists, for a full and satisfactory biography of this man. It is an irreparable loss to literature. Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable, except from the original sources, and, in his case, those are very small. What my own astonished eyes saw of Bartleby, that is all I know of him, except, indeed, one vague report, which will appear in the sequel. (39-40)

Many critics have agreed and many have disagreed on the similarity of the opening paragraphs in “Bartleby” and “The Lawyer’s Story.” I disagree with Mc Call that the opening paragraphs of both stories are similar because in the first paragraph of “The Lawyer’s Story” Maitland has his lawyer simply hire an extra copy clerk. In “Bartleby” Melville uses the first paragraph of the short story to formulate the characterization of the lawyer, and has the lawyer compare Bartleby to other scriveners he has known. However, there are several other paragraphs that are well into the short story of Bartleby that reflect more of a similarity to the first paragraph in “The Lawyer’s Story” rather than the first paragraph in “Bartleby.”

Now my original business—that of a conveyancer and title  
 hunter, and drawer-up of recondite documents of all sorts—

was considerably increased by receiving the Master's office.

There was now great work for scribes. Not only must I push the clerks already with me, but I must have additional help.

In answer to my advertisement, a motionless young man one morning stood upon my office threshold, the door being open, for it was summer. I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby. (45-6)

McCall, relentless in his critical analysis regarding the similarities in the first paragraphs of both stories, argues that Melville not only read the first installment of "The Lawyer's Story" but had, in fact, followed the serialized story to its conclusion.

In addition to the paragraphs and line quotes that I have focused on in "Bartleby" and "The Lawyer's Story" there remains many more obvious similarities. One is when both lawyers are reaching out to help their scrivener, however, Maitland's lawyer and Melville's lawyer have different motives. This reaching out shows a similarity between the two short stories, but also reveals a difference when in "The Lawyer's Story" the scrivener tells the lawyer that, "hope for the future is dead within me," and the anonymous lawyer replies, "I urge you to view the matter differently. You are a young man; brilliant prospects may be before you; happiness may yet await you." In "Bartleby" Melville's anonymous lawyer, after offering several employment options to Bartleby, who "prefers not to" accept them, offers to take Bartleby home with him. "Will you go home with me now—not to my office, but my dwelling—and remain there till we can conclude upon some convenient arrangement for you at our leisure?" (69). Maitland's lawyer is honest and benevolent, he truly wants to help his scrivener. Melville's lawyer,

who has been put under pressure to remove Bartleby from the stairs and entry of his former office, No\_\_ Wall Street, is not honest and benevolent for his only concern is that his tolerance regarding Bartleby's behavior will compromise his class position.

Fearful, then, of being exposed in the papers (as one person present obscurely threatened), I considered the matter, and, in length, said, that if the lawyer would give me a confidential interview with the scrivener, in his (the lawyer's) own room, I would that afternoon, strive my best to rid them of the nuisance they complained of. (68)

Melville's lawyer, in dealing with Bartleby's passive resistance throughout the short story, vacillates between paternalism and profits. Bartleby is a threat to his livelihood and Melville's lawyer is not ready to give up his "snug retreat or his snug business among rich man's bonds, mortgages, and title-deeds" (40). Ultimately he reluctantly approves of Bartleby's incarceration.

Henry A. Murray, in the critical essay, "Bartleby and I" refers to one particular passage in Melville's short story that adds more evidence to my argument that Melville's lawyer, as an employer, is not concerned with Bartleby's welfare, but is selfishly concerned with his own conscience should he have to have Bartleby physically removed, by the constable, from his office. He wants the result, but not the responsibility. In short, he is a hypocrite.

Although he endowed me with some propensity for sympathy, he made it evident that this was but one subordinate part of a calculating prudential philosophy,



and that the spring of whatever benevolence I may have manifested was not a compassionate concern for the welfare of Bartleby, but dread of the suffering that a punishing conscience would inflict on me if I, on my own initiative, called the constables and had that inflexible irritant removed from my office. (6)

Another prominent difference between “The Lawyer’s Story” and “Bartleby” lies in the phrase, “I prefer not to,” and “I would prefer.” Melville’s Bartleby “prefers not to,” Maitland’s scrivener “prefers to.” Melville, in borrowing the positive phrase “I would prefer” from Maitland, turns it into Bartleby’s negative phrase “I prefer not to” to emphasize Bartleby’s passive resistance to the lawyer’s demands. The phrase “I would prefer” appears one time in “The Lawyer’s Story” when the young scrivener says, “I would prefer being near my sister.” The phrase, “I would prefer,” assures us that there is no conflict or animosity between Maitland’s lawyer and scrivener. In “Bartleby” Melville has his scrivener answer “I prefer not to” twenty-one times throughout the tale. Elizabeth Hardwick, in the critical essay, “Bartleby in Manhattan” asks the question, “What is the difference between *will not* and prefer not?” Hardwick claims that there is no difference and that using one phrase or another does not alter Bartleby’s actions. “His I that prefers now, will not” (261). Hardwick, in the essay, writes, “Prefer has its power, however. The nipping clerks who have been muttering that they would like to ‘black his eyes’ or ‘kick him out of the office’ begin, without sarcasm or mimicry, involuntarily, as it were, to say to the lawyer, if you would prefer sir, ‘and so on.’ Bartleby is Melville’s creation, he is indeed Melville’s words, ‘wonderful words, and very few of them’” (261).

The word prefer certainly has power over Melville's lawyer for when he discovers that Bartleby has not left No\_\_ Wall St., as he was instructed to by the lawyer on the previous day, the lawyer concedes that Bartleby's passive resistance is overpowering him. "But again obeying that wondrous ascendance which the inscrutable scrivener had over me and from which ascendance, for all my chafing, I could not completely escape" (62).

Melville's lawyer cannot comprehend that Bartleby, who is his paid serf, could actually reduce the lawyer's position to his level with the one word, "prefer."

Turn the man out by an actual thrusting I could not;  
to drive him away by calling him hard names would not do;  
calling in the police was an unpleasant idea; and yet, permit  
him to enjoy his cadaverous triumph over me—this, too,  
I could not think of. (62)

So, in response to Bartleby's "prefer not to," the lawyer begins to exercise the power he believes he has, because of his class, over Bartleby. "What earthly right have you to stay here?---Do you pay any rent?---Do you pay my taxes?---Or is this property yours?" (63). Again, Melville stresses the power of passive resistance. "He answered nothing"---"He silently retired into his hermitage" (63). Melville's lawyer represents the greedy political and capitalist society of the nineteenth-century and Bartleby is Melville's characterized example that represents the victimized blue-collar worker.

Andrew Delbanco in his book, *Required Reading: Why Our American Classics Matter Now*, writes:

"Prefer" is a grating word because it rubs against the  
language of Wall Street, suggesting the heightened

politeness of the bitterly obedient servant whose only recourse against the master is to force him to drop his pretense of comradeship and to acknowledge his mastery.” (19-20)

Maitland’s lawyer successfully rescues his scrivener from his indifference and the story concludes on a happy note. Melville’s lawyer is unsuccessful in rescuing Bartleby and the story has a tragic ending. Research has uncovered that although there are no female characters in the published text of “Bartleby” Melville had originally included one female character. When he originally wrote “Bartleby” for *Putnam’s*, the grub-man in the Tombs where Bartleby is incarcerated has a name and a wife. They were Mr. and Mrs. Cutlets. In the original text Mr. Cutlets extends a dinner invitation to Bartleby. “May Mrs. Cutlets and I have the pleasure of your company to dinner sir, in Mrs. Cutlets private room?” (xii). Melville obviously eliminated Mr. & Mrs. Cutlets and the dinner invitation from the published text for it does seem inappropriate at this point in the short story, while Bartleby is in complete withdrawal and slowly dying, to extend him a dinner invitation. One critic, quoted by Dan McCall, suggests that a note of, “inappropriate slapstick is introduced by the name ‘Cutlets’ and the reference to a woman’s ‘private room’” (xii). Other critics, McCall notes, write, “that is what is good about it, that the name ‘Cutlets’ is symbolically appropriate altogether in keeping with the names of those other secondary characters ‘Turkey,’ and ‘Nippers’ and ‘Ginger Nut’” (xiii).

However, McCall does not agree with this interpretation and neither do I. Melville eliminated Mr. and Mrs. Cutlets because they do not serve any purpose in the

story or add any measure of conviction to the various themes in "Bartleby." The characters, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut do have a purpose in "Bartleby" and Melville uses them sparingly, but wisely, throughout the short story. In "Bartleby" Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut are used as examples of nineteenth-century employees who are victims of their class in America's division of labor. They are Melville's sad examples of America's underpaid working class who are, in their employment, subjected to working in a less than desirable environment for meager wages. By his masterful choice of words Melville, early on in "Bartleby," paints a dismal and bleak picture of Turkey, Nippers, Ginger Nut, and Bartleby's working environment.

My chambers were up stairs, at No.—Wall Street.

At one end, they looked upon the white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft, penetrating the building from top to bottom. This view might have been considered rather tame than otherwise, deficient in what landscape painters call 'life.'

But, if so, the view from the other end of my chambers offered, at least, a contrast, if nothing more. In that direction, my windows commanded an unobstructed view of a lofty brick wall, black by age and everlasting shade; which wall required no spy-glass to bring out its lurking beauties, but, for the benefit of all near-sighted spectators, was pushed up to within ten feet of my window-panes. (40-1)

By eliminating any trace of nature Melville enforces a picture that suggest a cell-like setting of the lawyer's chambers. It is no wonder then why Turkey consumes alcohol at lunchtime, Nippers hisses rather than speaks, and Ginger Nut frequently leaves the office in search of ginger nut cakes. They are, like Bartleby and Melville, victims of America's economic power system. Turkey, who was not far from sixty, was tied to his scrivener position because of his age and limited employment opportunities. Nippers was twenty-five, but did not have many employment choices because of his class, and Ginger Nut, who was twelve years old and had been sent to the lawyer's office to study law, was used by the lawyer as an errand boy. Melville represents, along with the debilitating and depressing working environment of the lawyer's office, these three characterizations to expose the working conditions of America's working class. An article in the *New York Times* on October 1, 1853 titled "Meeting of Dry Goods Clerks" states,

There was no man who would send his son to a dry goods store, if he could avoid it, as long as he is obliged to work for fifteen or sixteen hours a day. Young men at present are, almost throughout the City obliged to give assistance in their stores generally until after 10, and sometimes 11 o'clock at night, and indeed, it is seldom a clerk ever gets to bed before 12 o'clock. This system is not only deleterious to the clerk himself, but it will finally prove destructive to the interests of the store keeper also. For the fact is, that the clerks will

become worn-out and disgusted, and in five years

hence, unless employers change their system.

Another article in the *New York Times* on January 22, 1853, titled "Walks Among the New York Poor" addresses the poor families who live in a stack of houses near the East River in the Eleventh and Seventeenth Wards. These houses were owned by distinguished and wealthy gentlemen of the city, better known as New York City slum lords. The article exposes the filthy rundown conditions of these houses and the families who earn their meager living by being rag pickers, scavengers, bone-pickers, and street-crossing sweepers. Melville was an avid reader of the *New York Times* and was well aware of the working conditions and poverty in New York City. Melville could well relate to the rejection and disappointments of the working class and the poor for he had, at many times in his own life, felt rejected and financially incapacitated. Melville's parents had rejected him as a child in favor of his brother Gansevoort, and later in his life American critics and readers had rejected his literary works. For the majority of his years he could never earn enough money to support his growing family and was constantly in debt to provide the finances needed to advance his literary career. Melville, counting all the sales of his novels in Britain and America, had only earned a little more than ten thousand dollars in his lifetime.

The lawyer in "Bartleby" uses his privilege and power to isolate his employees, and expects them to accommodate his every whim with no resistance. That is until Bartleby! Melville uses Bartleby's passive resistance to show how fragile the lawyer is for with the first "I prefer not to" Melville has Bartleby take possession, of not only his world, but of the lawyer's materialistic world. With the simple phrase, "I prefer not to"

the lawyer's 'snug retreat' begins to crumble and with it his power begins to crumble. Melville, because of his suffering from literary rejection and financial insecurity shows, through the characterizations of Bartleby, Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut his compassion for the working class and his anger, frustration, and dislike for America's economic power system.

Several other essays offer other interpretations relating to "Bartleby." Todd F. Davis, in the essay "The Narrator's Dilemma in Bartleby the Scrivener: The Excellently Illustrated Re-statement of a Problem" focuses on the lawyer-narrator characterization in "Bartleby." Davis writes that to understand Bartleby, or the story, the reader must concentrate on the lawyer's dialogue, for it is he who interprets Bartleby throughout the short story. While agreeing with Dan McCall that the narrator is intelligent, humorously ironic, generous, self-aware, passionate, and thoroughly competent, Davis, in the essay, takes McCall's description a step further and writes that the narrator, by reiterating his many confrontations with Bartleby, will realize the short-comings of his materialistic world and will then re-assess his life by the end of the story. Quoting the critic Forst in the essay, Davis writes that although he agrees with Forst that the narrator can never return to his former life, he is not quite sure that the lawyer has learned, through his Bartleby experience, what he needs to know. Davis presents a logical explanation of the lawyer's unsuccessful attempt to bridge the differences between his horological world and Bartleby's chronometrical world.

Another school of critics approach "Bartleby" from a religious point of view arguing that Melville borrowed extensively from the Bible when writing "Bartleby." The Christ imagery is attributed to Melville's use of specific biblical verses. Critic Bruce

Franklin, in his work, *The Wake of the Gods*, writes that, “‘Bartleby’ illustrates point by point Christ’s injunction in Matthew 25: 34-40:

Then shall the King say unto them on his right hand, Come, ye blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world:

For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat; I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in:

Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me; I was in prison, and ye came unto me.

Then shall the righteous answer him, saying, Lord, when saw we thee an hungred, and fed *thee*? Or thirsty, and gave *thee* drink?

When saw we thee a stranger, and took *thee* in? or naked, and clothed *thee*?

Or when saw we thee sick, or in prison, and came unto thee?

And the King shall answer and say unto them, Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me. (4)

Dan McCall writes that, “This does not quite work” (4). The lawyer does not give Bartleby clothes and he does not feed him. The lawyer does, however, take him in and tries to help Bartleby, and when Bartleby is incarcerated in the Tombs the lawyer does go to the Tombs to inquire about Bartleby’s condition. Franklin also makes reference to what he determines as a recurrent series of puns in “Bartleby;” election, advent, and passion, and points out that when Christ is sent to prison he is much like Bartleby, or I



should say, Melville's Bartleby is much like Christ. Both are innocent, both are sent to prison amid murderers and thieves, and both are denied recognition three times. In the Bible Peter denies Christ three times, "I know not this man of whom ye speak," (Mark 14:71), and in "Bartleby" the lawyer, when under pressure from his peers, denies Bartleby three times.

**One:** but really, the man you allude to is nothing to  
me--. (67)

**Two:** I certainly cannot inform you. I know nothing  
about him. (67)

**Three:** In vain I persisted that Bartleby was nothing  
to me--. (68)

It is true that Melville includes biblical passages and Christ-like images in "Bartleby" that are too obvious to ignore however, in order to understand Melville's use of biblical passages and Christ-like images in "Bartleby" and his other literary work the reader has to initially grasp and understand that the creative process has two very distinct phases. Critic Lawrance Thompson in *Melville's Quarrel with God* writes, "First, what life does to the artist and then what the artist does to life, or makes of life, in retaliation" (418). The disillusionment and rejection that Melville experienced in his childhood, his youth, and his adulthood provided him with a span of doubt between his Christian idealism as a youth and his anti-Christian skepticism and agnosticism as an adult. His childhood Calvinistic heritage taught him that the Calvinistic-concept of God was that God was not a being of love but of fear. This concept Melville dismissed later in life when he assumed an attitude towards religion that challenged and doubted the religious

evidence presented through organized man-made religious rules. Thompson continues his argument, "Having started with hating Christians because they were not sufficiently Christian, he proceeded to hate Christians because they were Christians. When that scapegoat failed to satisfy him, he went on to hate the Calvinistic concept of God, and then proceeded to hate God" (423). In "Bartleby" Melville, employing the many different forms of artistic deception, expresses his anger and frustration towards the hierarchy of organized religion and the hierarchy of the wealthy capitalistic population in America. Using moral allegory to create ambiguous allegorical meanings in his work Melville created inverted meanings that were oblivious to many of *Putnam's* readers. The Christian readers that read "Bartleby" would tend to analyze the allegorical meanings and interpret them as they pleased. It was the "high hushed" literary authors who would recognize and study Melville's dark meaning regarding religion and politics in his literary work. This literary group would recognize Melville's distrust and disappointment in a God that he no longer embraced and a capitalistic nation that he found disappointing and inadequate in supporting the needs of its people.

The critic Richard J. Zlogar in the essay "Body Politics in Bartleby: Leprosy, Healing, and Christ-ness in Melville's Story of Wall Street" reflects on the leper imagery in "Bartleby." He argues that there is definitely a similar reading of Bartleby's separation rite in the short story and the ceremony when a leper is led to his house of exile. Zlogar also writes that among other distinctions in "Bartleby" that relate to lepers is the shift in focus from the wall Bartleby faces to the window that he gazes out of. This shift in focus, he claims, explicitly connects with the architectural curiosity of medieval churches in England called a "leper's window" that Melville probably discovered during his trip to

England in 1849. Zlogar writes that Melville is using the window in "Bartleby" to connect the character Bartleby to a leper who, like a leper, suffers from loneliness among the impersonal Wall Street society. Using the biblical passage of Mark 1: 40-42 Zlogar interprets the leper imagery in "Bartleby" by connecting the leper that Christ cures to the lawyer as a Christ figure and Bartleby as the leper who the lawyer fails to cure.

Melville's capitalistic lawyer in "Bartleby" is indeed incapable of curing Bartleby for he lives in a materialistic world surrounded by a capitalistic society that does not and will not care for their poor and sick population. Melville makes this quite clear when the lawyer discovers that Bartleby is homeless and has been living at No\_\_ Wall Street. "For the first time in my life a feeling of overpowering stinging melancholy seized me" (55).

Melville's lawyer's melancholy is short-lived as he proceeds to inspect Bartleby's locked desk. "I mean no mischief, seek the gratification of no heartless curiosity, thought I; besides the desk is mine, and its contents, too, so I will make bold to look within" (55).

Melville's lawyer as the Christ figure does not even attempt to cure Bartleby as the leper figure for after his little drama of melancholy subsides he reverts back to his capitalistic attitude of ownership. Melville's satirically characterizes the lawyer in "Bartleby" as a benevolent Christian, but exposes the lawyer's indifference to Bartleby's demise by the lawyer's actions throughout the short story. As the next critical essay shows Melville's lawyer in "Bartleby" does not change and totally fails at being a benevolent Christian.

Winifred Morgan in the critical essay "Bartleby and the Failure of Conventional Virtue" argues that Melville's main theme in all of his literary work, is the theme of discovery. She writes that with Bartleby's first "I prefer not to," the narrator-lawyer embarks on an emotional journey that takes him through anger, bargaining, and

depression while he tries to rationalize Bartleby's passive resistance. Throughout the essay Morgan refers to various biblical passages, quotes a series of critics, and emphasizes that the lawyer, although he believes he is being Christian, fails at the task. Pointing out that the lawyer's story is told after Bartleby's death, Morgan writes that the narrative becomes a voyage of loss and mourning. Does the lawyer now recognize his failure in trying to help Bartleby and has he changed by the end of the tale? Morgan believes that "Bartleby" reflects the failure of conventional virtue, for although the lawyer seems to have changed, it is difficult to determine just how much he has changed.

Richard R. John's essay "The Lost World of Bartleby, The Ex-officeholder: Variations on a Venerable Literary Form" examines the financial and social considerations attached to Bartleby's dismissal from the dead letter office, the corrupt political situation that existed in the nineteenth-century and Melville's anticipation and fears when attempting to secure a government position while writing "Bartleby." He writes that Melville was personally aware of the amount of unjust practices that were part of patronage politics when his friend Hawthorne was discharged from a political appointment, and that Melville, through the characterization of the unsympathetic and unreliable narrator-lawyer in "Bartleby," hoped to make the public aware of the injustices in the political system.

David Kuebrich in the essay "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in Bartleby" takes Richard R. John's essay a step further.

In the composition of "Bartleby," this subversive tradition  
and the author's painful personal experience combined in a

rich, creative synergy to produce a stunningly original analysis of employer-employee relations that stands as fit culmination and enduring witness to this indigenous antebellum tradition of radical political economy. (384)

Kuebrich continues on that:

An awareness of the many correlations between “Bartleby” and current social conditions and debates does not in itself explain the mysteries of the story, but it does make a strong prima facie case for viewing it as an historicized text more concerned with then contemporary economic realities than is usually acknowledged.” (388-9)

In his essay Kuebrich addresses the issues of capitalism and ideology in Melville’s “Bartleby” and interprets “Bartleby” as Melville’s critique of nineteenth-century American capitalism. He asserts that all other interpretations of the short story become incomprehensible if the reader cannot see the dangers of what he calls “capitalist compassion” that Melville depicts in the characterization of the narrator-lawyer. Using sub-titles and quotes from “Bartleby” throughout the essay to support his argument, Kuebrich writes that the short story was written as, and should be read as, a historicized text. Melville, he writes, was well aware of the class divisions in New York City in 1853 when he wrote “Bartleby” for *Putnam’s Magazine*. When moving his family from New York to Pittsfield, Massachusetts in late July, 1859 Melville continued to subscribe to the *New York Herald* and at times read *Greeley’s Tribune*. The author was well aware of the social tensions, political struggles, and ideological contestation between New York

workers and their employers in 1850. Melville, Kuebrich claims, hoped that “Bartleby” would expose specific ideological practices of injustice towards employees that were predominant in the workplace at this time. The symbolic setting of Wall Street in “Bartleby,” combined with the walls, screens, and glass doors just adds more evidence to Kuebrich’s theory of historical class-division. Bartleby’s employer, like Melville’s reader is ‘persuaded to see reality in a form they would otherwise reject’ (Pease 384).

Melville’s literary career has invited contrasting reaction from critics and scholars throughout the years and has brought to the forefront many of Melville’s personal beliefs. Melville’s literary vision dramatizes the conditions of alienation and the catastrophes that can occur when individuality goes against the grain of a structured society, a society that drives its ‘isolates’ to solitude and alienation. Isolation and resistance are two defense mechanisms that have been major themes in literature, and Melville, being quite aware of isolation and resistance in his own life, skillfully uses both of these themes in “Bartleby,” allowing his frustration and anger towards the literary critics and America’s reading audience to surface. “Bartleby” is partially autobiographical for through the characterization of Bartleby Melville is able to stand back and observe his own failures, his isolation, his resistance, and reflect on his personal attitude and views of American ideology, views that were as dark as he portrays in “Bartleby.” His novels and short stories reflect his teaching of absolute equality for all men. However, his works do not solve the many problems the lower working class faced in nineteenth-century America, they just scrutinize the many obstacles the lower working class encountered in their everyday life.

In response to Raymond M. Weaver’s 1921 biography *Herman Melville* most

critics at this time emphasized an autobiographical reading of "Bartleby." These biographers view "Bartleby" as a byproduct of Melville's literary failures, or as an allegory of the author's life. Additionally, they link the scrivener's "I prefer not to" to Melville's refusal to write what the reading public demanded in order to maintain his literary popularity. Herman Melville was a great borrower of other works by Thoreau, Emerson, Hawthorne, Shakespeare, Dickens, the *Bible*, James A. Maitland and many others. Melville would transform the original material he acquired from his borrowing into his own narratives. However, because he had many personal experiences in his own life and would include these in his work, many critics assume that the majority of his work is autobiographical. His first novel, *Typee*, a story about his experience in the South Seas is one example attributed to both Melville's borrowing and his life experience. *Typee* is a narrative that follows the adventures of Melville and fellow shipmate Richard Tobias Greene when both men shipped as ordinary seamen aboard the whaling ship *Acushnet* bound from Fairhaven, Massachusetts for the South Seas on January 3, 1841. As the story goes, both men jumped ship at Nuka Hiva in the Marquesas Islands and lived among the cannibalistic natives of the Taipi Valley for one month. Melville and Greene escaped the island on August 9, 1842 and joined the crew of the *Lucy Ann*, an Australian whaler. They were then placed ashore in Tahiti, charged with attempted mutiny and held there in confinement. There is evidence in *Typee* that Melville borrowed material from C.S. Stewart's *A Visit to the South Seas in the U.S. Ship Vincennes*. Stewart's book like Thomas Beale's *The Natural History of the Sperm Whale* did not enhance Melville's *Typee* or *Moby Dick* but just provided specific generic information about the South Seas and whaling. Both *Typee* and *Moby Dick* are directly

credited to Melville's personal adventures during his life, and both books reflect a combination of memory, imagination, and research that express Melville's desire to tell a good and convincing tale. John Murray who was willing to accept *Typee* for his *Home and Colonial Library* was suspicious of the authenticity of *Typee* for all the books in his *Library* were advertised to be exciting fiction, but all true accounts. Murray wanted documentary proof of *Typee's* authenticity. Richard Tobias Greene, Melville's fellow deserter from the *Acushnet*, appeared and provided the proof of the narrative up to the time of his and Melville's escape from the *Typees*. Murray added "The Story of Toby" to subsequent editions of *Typee* as documentary proof of its veracity. Melville's next book, *Omoo* was based on Melville's experience in Tahiti. *Mardi*, Melville's third novel in the South Seas trilogy published in March, 1849 by Bentley in London, was entirely unrelated to Melville's own personal experience.

Other critics took a psychological approach diagnosing Bartleby condition as schizophrenia, manic-depressive, or autism. There is no evidence in the text of "Bartleby" that supports these conditions. Melville never gives Bartleby's behavior a name, and the narrator, when he attempts to play therapist, simply calls the scrivener's behavior "Bartleby's incurable disorder."

Then there is a group of critics who look beyond Melville to reveal what they claim is the source of the story. They claim that "Bartleby" is based on actual lawyers such as Melville's father-in-law or Melville's brother Allan, a Wall Street lawyer. However, other critics claim that Melville used the prototype of his acquaintance Eli James Murdock Fly who was an apprentice in the law office of Melville's uncle. Others, have attached the inspiration for "Bartleby" to Thoreau, Emerson, and Dickens.



In "Bartleby" Melville strives to expose the political and ideological hierarchical power in the workplace. There is autobiography and religious allusions if only because the dominant ideologies and cultural practices of capitalism and Christianity so drastically affected his personal life and his literary career.

**CHAPTER II**  
**AMERICA'S ORIGINAL SIN**  
**HERMAN MELVILLE, SLAVERY, AND "BENITO CERENO"**

Melville's characterization of Babo and Babo's orchestrated masquerade in "Benito Cereno" makes visible the illusion of a contented slave performing a charade in order to camouflage his potential for revenge and hatred. Melville was not blind to America's original sin and although he voiced his outrage whenever he had the opportunity to address slavery he was not an active abolitionist. In "Benito Cereno" Melville does not accentuate the Africans as violent by nature, but attributes the violence in the story to the institution of slavery when Captain Delano, speaking for Melville in "Benito Cereno" says, "Ah, this slavery breeds ugly passions in man—Poor fellow!" (283). Melville's point is that the potential for violence, between the European and black African races will remain unchecked as long as the inhumane, immoral, and unchristian practice of slavery continues to exist in antebellum America.

Melville's Babo symbolically represents the abolition of slavery via mutiny, and the author has Babo display, through his organization of the mutiny, the striking intelligence of the black man. Melville has Babo organize the other slaves, choreograph and direct the play-acting for Captain Delano, and flawlessly play the part of a subordinate slave while exercising his control over Benito Cereno. Captain Delano sees only what Babo wants him to see, the dutiful black slave serving his white master. Melville has Babo continue to exercise his control over Don Benito in a subservient way when he reminds the Spaniard that it is twelve-thirty and, "master has told Babo, always to remind him, to the minute, when shaving time comes" (277). Delano, "relieved from

his former uneasiness" (279), sits back and is "amused with an odd instance of the African love of bright colors and fine shows" (279). Babo lathers Don Benito, he stropes the sharpest razor, and ceremoniously drapes his master in the colorful Spanish flag. Melville builds the shaving scene tediously by piling incident upon incident, detail upon detail until the play-acting between Don Benito and Babo climaxes when Babo slips and cuts Don Benito. Captain Amasa Delano, never even remotely considers the idea that a black man could pose a threat to a white man for the black man is an African slave and only an African slave in Delano's dominant white world. It is the Spaniard that Delano directs his contempt to as he watches Don Benito shake and shiver as Babo is shaving him. Delano considers Don Benito to be a weak white Spaniard who seems to have no control over the African slaves, and who tolerates the many insubordinate acts that the American captain has witnessed on board the *San Dominick*. The undistrustful good natured Delano observes the shaving scene as the primitive and the civilized act out their parts for his benefit. In the shaving scene Melville deploys the use of colors, primarily black and white and gray. Although black contrasted with white is explicit throughout the short story, Melville uses the imagery of the creamy, white lather stained by the white man's blood of the black man's razor and so turns the shaving of Don Benito into a moment of gray ambiguity that totally confuses Captain Delano even as it challenges his most basic assumptions about race and hierarchy. In short, Captain Delano cannot believe what he sees because it flies in the face of his ideological assumptions about the world:

Altogether the scene was somewhat peculiar, at least  
to Captain Delano, nor, as he saw the tow thus

postured, could he resist the vagary, that in the black  
 he saw a headsman, and in the white man at the  
 block...That master and man, for some unknown  
 purpose, were acting out, both in word and deed,  
 nay, to the very tremor of Don Benito's limbs,  
 some juggling play before him. (281-82)

Melville contrasts Babo's shrewdness and intelligence throughout the story against Benito Cereno's lack of leadership and Captain Delano's simplicity, for Delano's tunnel vision only sees Africans and African slaves in the stereotyped mold created by America's white society of the nineteenth-century. "There is something in the Negro which, in a peculiar way, fits him for avocations about one's person. Most Negroes are natural valets and hair-dressers; taking to the comb and brush congenially as to the castanets, and flourishing them apparently with almost equal satisfaction" (278). Captain Delano, oblivious to the fact that Babo has organized the masquerade for his benefit, only sees in his brand of paternalistic white racism that Babo and the blacks on the *San Dominick* are too docile to pose a threat to him and his ship.

When to this is added the docility arising  
 from the unaspiring contentment of a  
 limited mind, and that susceptibility of  
 blind attachment sometimes inhering in  
 indisputable inferiors, one readily perceives  
 why those hypochondriacs, Johnson and  
 Byron—it may be, something like the

hypochondriac Benito Cereno—took to  
 their hearts, almost to the exclusion of  
 the entire white race, their serving men,  
 the Negroes, Barber and Fletcher. (279)

Secure in his evaluation of the non-aggressive docility of the African slaves, Delano therefore begins to rely on his national prejudice and in doing so wrongly suspects the dark Spaniard Cereno of foul play. “But as a nation—continued he in his reveries—these Spaniards are all an odd set; the very word Spaniard has a curious, conspirator, Guy-Fawkish twang to it” (273). At one point in the short story, enforcing the naïve imagination of Captain Delano and his national prejudice, Melville has Delano ask himself if he is to be murdered on a haunted pirate-ship by a horrible Spaniard. “But if the whites had dark secrets concerning Don Benito, could then Don Benito be any way in complicity with the blacks? But they were too stupid. Besides, who ever heard of a white so far a renegade as to apostatize from his very species almost, by leaguering in against it with Negroes?” (270). At one point in “Benito” Delano convinces himself that Don Bonito is playing a part not assigned to his class. “The man was an imposter. Some low-born adventurer, masquerading as an oceanic grandee” (258). Delano alternates between trust and suspicion as he mentally interprets what he observes of Don Benito and the incidents on the *San Dominick* for Don Benito does not look like, or is attired like, a Captain who is in full control of his ship. In Delano’s eyes Benito looks like an “invalid courtier tottering about London streets in the time of the plague” (251). The more questions Melville has Delano ask of Don Benito throughout the short story, and the

more Delano observes what is happening on the *San Dominick* the more confused he becomes for it is impossible for him to comprehend what he sees before him.

Suddenly, one of the black boys, enraged at a word  
dropped by one of his white companions, seized  
a knife, and, though called to forbear by one of the  
oakum-pickers, struck the lad over the head, inflicting  
a gash from which blood flowed. In amazement,  
Captain Delano inquired what this meant. To which  
the pale Don Benito dully muttered, that it was merely  
the sport of the lad. (252-53)

In "Benito Cereno" Melville tries several times to cut through Delano's hazy view of what is happening on the *San Dominick* and awaken him to the true situation, but Delano, always reverting to the American theory of proslavery and the American's stereotyped view of Africans, argues with himself that the blacks are too stupid, docile, and childlike to ever attempt a mutiny. Melville carries the Americans stereotyped view of Africans throughout "Benito Cereno" to possibly cut through the hazy view of *Putnam's* readers who, like Delano, entertained a naïve attitude rather than a realistic realization that the Africans were men and women who would fight for their freedom. The haze that surrounds Delano in "Benito Cereno" finally clears when he bears witness to Babo's attempted murder of Don Benito. "That moment, across the long-benighted mind of Captain Delano, a flash of revelation swept, illuminating, in unanticipated clearness, his host's whole mysterious demeanor, with every enigmatic event of the day, as well as the entire past voyage of the *San Dominick*" (295). After the attempted murder of Don

Benito and the recapturing of the *San Dominick* by the American sailors, Delano encourages Don Benito to forget his horrific experience aboard the *San Dominick*. “You generalize Don Benito; and mournfully enough. But the past is passed; why moralize upon it? Forget it” (314). Don Bonito answers, “The Negro” (314).

Edward S. Grejda, in the essay, “Benito Cereno Reveals Melville’s Belief in Racial Equality,” writes: “The untamed and demoniac forces rampant on the *San Dominick* characterize not a particular race, but all of mankind. ‘Benito Cereno’ poses the problem which Herman Melville grappled with from *Typee* to *Billy Budd*: the ‘primeval savageness which ever slumbers in human kind, civilized or uncivilized’” (95). The barbaric behavior of the white sailors when they recapture the *San Dominick* reveals that while the ideology of the American institution of chattel slavery professes to be civilized it is, in fact, brutally and barbarically violent. In “Benito” Melville suggests that the characters and moral issues of the African slave trade, chattel slavery, America’s stereotype view of African slaves, and indentured servitude are not white or black, but blur into a grey that distinguishes them only as men and women who are fighting for their freedom from a culture that has enslaved them. Melville’s “Negro” represents slavery, the multiple brutalities of slavery, the slave mutiny, and the vicious acts and barbarism that were acted out on board the *San Dominick* by the slaves, the Spaniards, and the Americans.

In the essay, “The Topicality of Depravity in “Benito Cereno,”” critic Allan Moore Emery divides critical reviews of “Benito Cereno” into two camps.

- (1) those who read the tale as a powerful portrait of human depravity, with a sadistic Babo as the prime

embodiment of evil, an obtuse Delano as Melville's figure of naïve optimism, and a doomed Cereno as his contrasting symbol of moral awareness; and (2) those who view the tale as a stern indictment of American slavery, complete with an amply prejudiced Delano, a guilt-ridden Cereno, and a sympathetic (or even heroic) Babo, driven to violence by an insufferable bondage. (303)

The second camp of critics note, as I do in my argument, that Melville, in "Benito Cereno," criticizes the American and Spanish perspective on the issue of chattel slavery, and that in the characterization of Captain Delano from Duxbury, Massachusetts the author explicitly satirizes and vilifies the northerners racist attitude and response to slavery. In "Benito" Delano's sympathetic attitude towards the African slaves does not overcome his desire for revenge, or the prospect that he might well prosper financially from the recapturing of the *San Dominick's* cargo of slaves. Melville, through Delano, reveals the hypocritical attitude of Americans who openly criticize America's involvement in the slave trade and the institution of slavery, but secretly conceal their acceptance and approval of the slave system for personal monetary gain.

In the critical essay, "Melville," Laurie Robertson-Lorant provides further evidence to this point.

Melville deconstructs 'niceness' as a moral category at the end of the story; when the Americans board the ship, they restrain themselves from maiming or killing the Africans,



nor because they are kind, but because they plan to claim the “cargo” and want it to be undamaged. The willingness of the American captain to continue the slave trade parallels his willingness of the “enlightened” founding Fathers to bring the slavery of the Old World into the New. (292)

Herman Melville was not an abolitionist, but he clearly abhorred slavery calling it in *Mardi* (1849), “A blot, foul as the crater-pool of hell [that] puts out the sun at noon” (534), and in *Battle-Pieces* an “atheistic iniquity.” Melville was also an advocate for justice, and in “Benito Cereno” he portrays the African slaves’ mutiny as a fight for equality, freedom, and human dignity. In “Benito Cereno” Melville makes it quite evident that the African slaves, in order to re-establish themselves as human beings and to shed the stereotyped image that the white man has placed on them must, as slaves held in bondage, overthrow those who oppress them.

British colonists who settled in the New World justified their prejudices and actions in the transformation of black Africans into property by expounding on the Christian justification of slavery, the curse of Ham. They argued that it was righteous to enslave the black race in servitude for that race had already been condemned to servitude in the Holy Scriptures. Therefore it can be said that British colonists became advocates of chattel slavery by following the teachings of the Catholic Church who, for centuries, had based their belief in chattel slavery on the same biblical reading and had kept black slaves as property on their sugar plantations and as domestic servants in Spanish and Portuguese America. As the historical explorers of Africa, such as David Livingstone, created the image of the Dark Continent, the churches in turn began to exploit the image

of the Africans as heathen and savage. The British colonists, building on these stereotypical images of the black African race, defined the appellations 'Négro' or 'black' synonymously with slave. However, the old mythology of the African black race as savages took a new shape in colonization and the imagery of the savage shifted. The colonists now stereotyped their African slaves as biologically inferior but impulsive and childlike. The hierarchy based on the colonial 'color bar' justified and served as an alibi for the forced labor and exploitation of African black slaves. Colonial ideology was about the White Man's Burden, but the reality was that cheap slave labor increased the profits and power of the colonists. Marx remarked: "The profound hypocrisy and inherent barbarism of bourgeois civilization lies unveiled before our eyes in the colonies, where it goes naked" (100). Theodore L. Sylvester in the book, *Slavery Throughout History*, adds more evidence to the colonists stereotyped view of the African slaves regarding biology and race.

The British colonist viewed Africans not only as morally inferior but biologically inferior as well. Africans were seen as physically a lesser breed than white Europeans. To many white colonists, black Africans were alien and foreign, even mysterious and threatening. The pigment of their skin, the shape of their faces, and the texture of their hair all set Africans apart to the whites and fueled their contention that Africans were a race that was somehow suited to enslavement. (123)

Melville was quite aware of America's hypocrisy for it professed itself as a nation that was founded on equality, but was in reality a country that continued to thrive on the institution of slavery, exploitation, and dispossession. He bitterly protested the injustices of colonization, the stigmatization of indigenous people, and in "Benito Cereno" the American stereotyped image of Africans. His view of the aristocratic white American was also evidenced in many of his earlier works. In *Typee* (1846), Melville accuses the white man of being "The most ferocious animal on the face of the earth" (125), and in *Redburn* (1849) he voices his opinion about the white man: "We may have civilized bodies, and yet barbarous souls" (293).

Melville was a very angry citizen in America who was financially and emotionally wounded when he entered the magazine marketplace and wrote "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" and "Benito Cereno" for *Putnam's*. Forced to go underground as a writer in 1853 because of the disappointing reception of *Moby Dick* (1851) and *Pierre* (1852) Melville's short stories for *Putnam's* which included "Bartleby," "Benito Cereno," "The Lightning Rod Man," and "The Bell-Tower," were published anonymously. At this point in Melville's life when he began writing for *Putnam's* his literary career was a failure, and his personal life included a growing family, mounting debt, a dwindling reputation, and no opportunities for steady employment as a way of supporting his family. *Putnam's* provided the means for Melville to support his family, and by writing anonymously he could voice his opinions through the short stories without suffering the rejection of the reading public.

The critic, William B. Dillingham, in *Melville's Short Fiction* writes,

He wrote as he did in these stories for two basic reasons:

concealment and artistic experimentation. He camouflaged meanings because concealment had already become a characteristic of his nature as a writer, because the articulation of a private vision in coded language, as it were, served the ends of both therapy and art, and because the magazines he was writing for demanded palatable art for queasy minds. One motive furthered the other: greater concealment led to greater experimentation. What appear to be inoffensive and somewhat amateurish sketches composed for the masses are in reality highly sophisticated and poetically compacted works often of unsurpassed originality. (7-8)

Using mixed-form of narrative in "Benito Cereno" Melville presents to the reader a world that is bound by the laws of its particular society as he cleverly employs the use of suspense, surprise, and alternation in the short story to present his own views on slavery. Melville's aim in the *Putnam* short stories was to expose the underlying perversion of a white hierarchal society that prospered due to the forced enslavement of human beings in factories, ships, plantations, and offices, all to produce the means that would benefit the handful of production owning parasites in capitalistic America.

Melville's "Benito Cereno" was well suited to *Putnam's* editorials in 1852, editorials that were becoming more and more belligerent on the slavery issue in antebellum America. Along with Melville's first installment of "Benito Cereno" that appeared in *Putnam's* in October 1855, *Putnam's* editors ran a long piece on the "suicide

of slavery” in which they prophesied not only the death of slavery but the death of the republic itself. “We sit with dull eyes and heavy spirit, as we listen to the tick of a death-watch as armed marauders of Missouri carry their slaves into Kansas under protection of Congress, which had recently annulled the Missouri Compromise by declaring the Kansas Territory open to slaveholders” (230). The Missouri Compromise of 1820 that allowed the continued expansion of slavery to the west uprooted more than one million African-Americans from the older slave states to the newer ones.

History questions how the slaves survived the many transitions in their lives, as they were more and more demoralized for decades before the Civil War. The black immigrants to North America faced lives of physical and psychological hardships from one generation to the next for the conditions of slavery would be passed down from parent to child. Masters of plantations realized that, in order for the slaves to endure plantation living, they would have to allow the establishment of black families and black communities to develop. The philosophy of the master was that a slave who had a family dependent on him/her would be a more obedient and hardworking slave. So, although legal marriages among slaves were not recognized long-term relationships were encouraged, for the master looking to the future envisioned the slave’s eventual children as laborers. Although family breakup and the disruption of established relationships was part and parcel of a slave’s life, the family and kinship ties that prospered among the slaves had a huge part in the slave’s survival. The slaves possessed the ability and the intelligence to take action in their own interest and did form black communities on many plantations. Music and performing was an inherent part of a slave’s existence. It was the crucial starting point of community and cultural building that drew black slaves from

different regions who, because of different languages, could not converse but shared the same African musical background. Songs of grief, worship, love, and work became the common denominator that brought together entire black communities from neighboring plantations. When being transported from Africa to the colonies on the slave ships the slaves were encouraged to sing and dance. ‘Dancing the slaves’ was the expression used by the slave traders and was usually accompanied by the use of a whip. The theory of America’s white supremacy was that a merry slave was a happy slave, but according to Frederick Douglass, who escaped slavery in 1838, allowing the slaves to sing and dance was a way of keeping revolts and rebellion at bay on the plantations.

An article published in *Putnam’s Monthly* in 1855, when “Benito Cereno” was published, confirms Douglass’ theory of the not so merry slave.

But with all this charming jollity and waggishness, the nigger has terrible capacities for revenge and hatred (which opportunity many develop, as in St. Domingo), and which ought to convince the skeptic that he is a man, not a baboon; and whenever our southern partners quit us, and begin to take care of their niggers themselves, they will learn that they are no joke.

Melville emphasizes Douglass’ point in “Benito Cereno” in the characterization of Babo when, “Glancing down at his feet, Captain Delano saw the freed hand of the servant aiming with a second dagger—a small one, before concealed in his wool—with this he was snakishly writhing up from the boat’s bottom, at the heart of his master, his

countenance lividly vindictive, expressing the centered purpose of his soul" (295).

Melville, aware of the intelligence of the slaves and their desire for freedom, reveals that the white race should not underestimate the African race for it was not only the slave mutinies on the slave ships that distinguished the African's desire for freedom. Small acts of resistance by slaves were common in plantation life but no act of defiance was more commonplace than the runaway slave. Small acts of resistance such as pretending to be sick to avoid work, bungling a task, or stealing food and larger acts of defiance such as running away, riots, and planned revolts resulted in harsh physical punishment such as whippings, branding, or the wearing of shackles.

In the 1850's Melville, although personally withdrawn from the literary circle in New York, kept a keen eye on the slavery issue in America and had access to the many articles and periodicals that were published regarding pro-slavery and anti-slavery when he was writing "Benito Cereno." Articles that were anti-slavery in *Putnam's*, articles in the *New York Times* that gave an overview and daily account of what was happening with the slavery issue, and many other various accounts of slavery and the slave trade in the influential black newspapers in America such as, *Frederick Douglass' Paper* (1851-1860), *The Colored American* (1837-1842 *The*), *Alienated American* (1853-1854), *Impartial Citizen* (1849-1856), and *The Ram's Horn* (1847-1850). Melville understood that the controversy over slavery between the Northern and Southern states in America was due to the continuing political process fueled by racism that prevented the dominant, white culture from visualizing an egalitarian, biracial society. Not only was he anti-slavery in regards to the American institution of slavery but also addressed, in many of his other works, other forms of slavery that existed in America in the nineteenth-century.

Critic Robert Midler, in the essay, “Herman Melville 1819-1891: A Brief Biography,” addresses Herman Melville’s assessment of chattel slavery in America during the nineteenth-century. He writes,

Melville abhorred slavery and voiced his outrage  
whenever he addressed it, yet, try as one might to  
allegorize his writing or draw workable analogies  
between text and context, politics in general  
and anti-slavery politics in particular are not  
(except in “Benito Cereno” and some of the poems  
in *Battle-Pieces*) at its immediate center. (33)

Midler, in this essay, addresses only chattel slavery and completely dismisses the many apparent and various elements of slavery in Melville’s other works. This is not a true assessment for many other critics and scholars, as well as myself, have detected specific evidence that relates to other various forms of slavery in many of Melville’s other texts. Several examples of this are: “The Tartarus of Maids” when the girls that work in the factory are portrayed as sub-human slaves chained to the machinery of American capitalism, or in “Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street” where Melville exposes America’s class-division, hierarchal power, and wage-slavery, and in *Billy Budd, Sailor: An Inside Narrative* where Melville addresses American Military slavery and hierarchal power in the characterizations of Billy Budd and Captain Vere.

“Benito Cereno” was published in *Putnam’s Monthly* magazine in October, November, and December 1855. However, Melville placed “Benito Cereno” in 1799. J.H. Kavanagh explains this placing of “Benito Cereno” in 1799 this way: “We can



surely read as significant the setting of this story of a rebellion in 1799, a period flush with the triumphant victories of the American and French revolutions, a period whose “momentousness,” as Melville elsewhere remarks, is un-exceeded “by any other era of which there is record” (361). Another possibility is that Melville changed the date and the name of Cereno’s vessel to coincide with the violent slave revolt on the isle of Santo Domingo in 1799 led by Toussaint L’Ouverture. The African slaves in Santo Domingo rose up and revolted on August 22, 1791 and would not lay down their arms until Haiti became an independent nation on January 1, 1804. From that day on Haiti became a beacon of hope and freedom for all the black slaves in the New World. Other sources that probably provided material for Melville when writing “Benito Cereno” could very well be the numerous articles, published in the *New York Times*, on the African Slave Trade and chattel slavery in America’s southern states.

Criticism tells us that Melville based “Benito” on the eighteenth chapter of a story published in Boston in 1817, titled *Narrative of Voyages and Travels in the Northern and Southern Hemispheres* by Amasa Delano of Duxbury, Massachusetts. Rosalie Feltenstein in the essay, “Melville’s Use of Delano’s Narrative” comes to Melville’s defense. “Most of this criticism is inadequate because it considers only the factual, narrative level of the tale, disregards Melville’s highly conscious artistry, and seems unaware of his extension through symbolism of the meanings of this factual level” (125). Feltenstein goes on in the essay to say that one way to see how Melville used the source is to be aware of his technique and treatment of Delano’s *Narrative of Voyages*. In *Narrative of Voyages* Delano’s narrative is a matter-of-fact rendition of a shrewd sea captain who believed in whippings, and who is less interested in the evil of slavery on the

Spanish ship than the Spanish captain trying to deny Delano his right to salvage the ship's cargo. Feltenstein argues that Melville made many alterations when he wrote "Benito Cereno."

Feltenstein writes:

The statement that Melville found his story ready-made is surely contradicted by the extent of the list of his alterations. He changes the names of the two ships from the *Perseverance* and the *Tryal* to the *Bachelor's Delight* and the *San Dominick*; he invents the oakum pickers and the hatchet polishers, the shaving of Cereno by Babo, the appearance of the giant Atufal in chains, the luncheon aboard the Spanish ship, the attack of the two Negroes upon the Spanish seaman, the glimpse of the sailor with the jewel, the incident of the sailor and the knot, and finally, Don Benito's death in a monastery. (126)

I do agree with Feltenstein that Melville, in "Benito Cereno" does make alterations, however there are names and incidents from Chapter XVIII of Delano's *Narrative of Voyages* (304-353) that Melville blatantly pirates from. The captain in *Narrative of Voyages* and "Benito Cereno" is Don Benito Cereno, the owner of the slaves on the Spanish ship *Tryal* and the owner of the slaves on the Spanish ship *San Dominick* is Don Alexandro Aranda, Amasa Delano is the American captain of the *Perseverance* and is also the American captain of the *Bachelor's Delight*, and Artufal and Babo are two black slaves from Senegal on the *Tryal* and are two black slaves from Senegal on the *San*

*Dominick*. The execution of the black slave Mure who is the organizer of the mutiny and servant to Benito Cereno in *Narrative of Voyages*, and the execution of the black slave Babo who is the organizer of the mutiny and servant to Benito Cereno in “Benito Cereno” in both stories is very similar.

To the common penalty of death, which shall be executed, by taking them out and dragging them from the prison, at the tail of a beast of burden, as far as the gibbet, where they shall be hung until they are dead. That the heads of the five first be cut off after they are dead, and be fixed on a pole, in the square of the port of Talcahuano, and the corpses of all be burnt to ashes. (347)

In the essay “Melville” Laurie-Robertson-Lorant writes that,

In the end, Babo’s point of view comes across wordlessly and lingers in the reader’s mind. The story closes with the haunting image of Babo’s head, “that hive of subtlety,” impaled on a pole in the Plaza by the “civilized” Spaniards. The “unabashed gaze” of Babo stares down the long corridors of history in accusation and defiance, a challenge to a nation heading inexorably toward civil war. (293)

Lorant is absolutely right. Melville uses “that hive of subtlety” to impress on *Putnam’s* readers that sixty-two years after “Benito’s” setting in 1799, the young

American Nation will be engaged in a civil war over chattel slavery. In reality, because Melville wrote "Benito" in 1855, the beginning of the Civil War was knocking at America's door, just a mere six years away. When placing "Benito" in 1799 Melville was well aware that the Transatlantic Slave Trade was a flourishing and profitable enterprise in 1799. By 1820 at least ten million slaves had been transported to the New World via the Atlantic Slave Trade. However, four million of these ten million slaves had died in transportation or on the plantations leaving only six million people of the African black race as descendents in America. This shocking set of figures reveals the inhumanity that the Africans suffered because of slavery and the slave trade. Britain banned the slave trade, but not slavery, in 1807, and the United States followed Britain in 1808. So, in "Benito" Melville places Delano smugly within American law as he has Delano take possession of the *San Dominick* and its cargo of African slaves.

When writing "Benito" in 1855 Melville lived in a slave society rather than a society with slaves for although some African slaves had gained their freedom through private manumissions in the upper South, or gradual emancipation in the Northern states America was still considered a slave society. It was not until January 1, 1863 when President Lincoln issued his final Emancipation Proclamation that all slaves in America became free men and women.

With the end of the Civil War in 1865 peace had returned to America however, the nation would now have to find a way to seek a lasting peace between the Northern conqueror and the Southern conquered citizens of America. This peace and the search for reconciliation in the United States remains incomplete, as it did in the many years of

reconstruction after the Civil War, for now in the twenty-first century many citizens of the United States have merely changed the name of chattel slavery to racism.

## CONCLUSION

The two short stories, "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" and "Benito Cereno," by Herman Melville portray the limits of an individual who confronts the power and authority of nineteenth-century white America. From wage-slavery and resistance in "Bartleby" to chattel slavery and resistance in "Benito Cereno," Melville uncovers how and why both Bartleby and Babo become victims of those in power. Melville's strong opinion regarding the institution of chattel slavery and the injustices imposed on the lower class are quite evident in the two tales. The settings of each story symbolize America and American ideology, and the narratives represent the tragic futility of the working class and the African slaves who challenge the capitalistic hegemony.

Melville's comic touches in both "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno," intended to make the stories palatable to *Putnam's* audience, are in turn a cruel mockery of America's traditional social values. The two tales dramatically illustrate Melville's personal despair over his failed literary career and his disenchantment with the hierarchal power of the dominant white class when writing "Bartleby" and "Benito Cereno." Like Bartleby, Melville was walled-in by the norms of American society and the American readers who refused to accept him as an accomplished author. In retaliation Melville created characters that displaced the reading public from their comfort zone of optimism, a comfort zone that existed between the haves and have-nots, the division between the wealthy and the poor, and the division between the white-skinned and the dark-skinned population in America. Melville paints both Bartleby and Babo with the same fictional angst. When Babo is faced with a world that does not make sense he constructs a means of dealing with it by organizing a slave mutiny aboard the *San Dominick*. Bartleby

chooses the martyrs' saintly way of passive resistance and initiates his own death as a way out of a world the he cannot and will not conform to. In order to survive in a hostile chaotic world any individual has to scrupulously adhere to the roles and rituals of the white dominant society where one can only gain at most a limited autonomy.

Bartleby and Babo both realize the reality of their lives, and choose through passive and violent behavior to either change their situation or submit to death, for only death has the power to free them from distorted ideals. In a world devoid of moral values Bartleby and Babo never waver from their personal commitment to resist the enslavement of wage-slavery and chattel slavery that controls their lives and stand as Melville's role models for all future generations who might be victimized by wage-slavery, chattel slavery, and racism.

In Melville's literary works, and in his life, the themes of rejection, isolation, passive resistance, and disappointment in the human race continually surface. Melville's characters were victims of poverty and debasement and Melville uses this victimization to prove skillfully that it was the power of whiteness over blackness that shaped antebellum American culture, a culture who's values were indifferent to human suffering and the injustices of racism and class. The antebellum notion that power and privilege is derived from race, class, and wealth is a notion that is strongly in-cultured in American society. The power and privilege of white America was, and still is, based on the capitalistic and political forces that invariably shape the social norms of America's white wealthy society.

White America has always harbored a dual self in regards to the African-American. While America professes the principles of democracy she continually

practices the antithesis of democracy. Today it is called "white backlash." This theory is rooted in the same problems that America formulated in the beginning when the first chained black men arrived on its shores. The government and the white society in America theoretically refuse to address or to assume a commitment and the personal responsibility that arose from the tragic institution of slavery and the emancipation of the African slaves. The African-American dilemma in America lies not within the world of the African-American but lies in the world of the white. As Martin Luther King, Jr. writes, "In short, white America must assume the guilt for the black man's inferior status" (489). In 1857 the Supreme Court of the United States, in the Dred Scott decision, confirmed the legality of the system of slavery by supporting and affirming that the Negro had no rights that the white man was bound to respect. Martin Luther King, Jr. argues that, "Virtually all of the Founding Fathers of our nation, even those who rose to the heights of the Presidency, those whom we cherish as our authentic heroes, were so enmeshed in the ethos of slavery and white supremacy that not one ever emerged with a clear, unambiguous stand on Negro rights" (489). When George Washington died he owned and leased more than one hundred sixty slaves, and Thomas Jefferson, in his speeches, portrayed the Negro as inferior to the white man. As late as 1862 Abraham Lincoln presented a plan of gradual emancipation to slave states with the promise of one hundred million dollars as retribution, they refused and ultimately on January 1, 1863 Lincoln issued the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the Negro from chattel slavery. Consequently the American government, in the issuance of the Emancipation Proclamation, did not provide any financial or moral support for the Negroes advancement and welfare. Four million freed slaves had no bread to eat, no land to farm,



and no homes to live in. In 1954 a plan was initiated to end school segregation but lacked a follow up plan that would make integration a reality. Congress passed a civil rights bill in 1868 but refused to enforce it, and in 1964 Congress again passed a civil rights bill that has not been fully enforced to this day. The laws that have been passed in America to benefit the black society have become a mockery of America's judicial system. Slavery is an historical fact that cannot be erased by simply denying responsibility, but must be formed, understood, absorbed, and made into a supporting structure that will withstand intelligent decisions in the future. To ignore the dehumanization of slavery is as wrong as ignoring the needs of the four million freed slaves in 1863. Man should not, and consciously can not, walk away from the needs of every human being, regardless of color, that walk on God's land.

Is it possible for white and black communities in America to co-exist without hatred? The persistent problem of "the color line" continues to plague America's white dominate society categorizing it as the only country in history where racism, due to color, has been so important for so long. The issue of color is so imbedded in the fabric of American history from its inception that it becomes impossible to erase the dehumanization of the African slaves, through the institution of slavery, from the minds of both white and black communities. The question that remains is not why, but how can America rid itself of the stigma of "the color line." Evidence has been found that poor blacks in many cities, although cynical about their chances of influencing government, have not allowed their attitudes to influence their decision as to whether or not to become actively involved in politics. Having a strong sense of community, poor blacks attempt to cross "the color-line" in politics in order to promote and publicize government programs

initiated to eradicate the underlying causes of poverty. The activists of poor black communities realize that participation is an essential tool in improving the quality of life in their neighborhoods and that passivity will only compound their misery. Working to instill high aspirations and expectations in their children for the future, despite financial and cultural obstacles, is of prime importance to poor families living in inner city black communities. Crossing “the color-line,” by defying racial slurs and un-equality is perhaps the first step that poor black parents must engrain in their children until the dream is realized that all children will be evaluated not by the color of their skin, but by the quality of their character will the barriers to crossing “the color-line” be extinguished.

The *New York Times* front page headline on January 21, 2009 read: “The 44<sup>th</sup> President: Obama takes oath, and Nation in Crisis Embraces the Moment” (1). Another article on the front page of the *Times* marked Barack Obama’s oath as “A Milestone in History” (1). It read:

Beyond the politics of the occasion, the sight of a black man climbing the highest peak electrified people across racial, generational and partisan lines. Mr. Obama largely left it to others to mark the history explicitly, making only passing reference to his own barrier-breaking role in his 18-minute Inaugural Address, noting how improbable it might seem that “a man whose father less than 60 years ago might not have been served at a local restaurant can now stand before you to take a most sacred oath. (1)

Jesse Jackson's statement, "From the outhouse to the White House" (481) contradicts the actions of the dominant white society to keep blacks in a subjugated condition since their arrival as African slaves in colonized America. For Jesse Jackson, the African American population, and a large percentage of the white American population Martin Luther King Jr's. dream became a reality when Americans of all races unanimously elected, in 2008, Barack Hussein Obama as the first African-American president of the United States.

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