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Battle of the Mind

What would it feel like to be an alien? This slow paced but immensely gripping story is of an unusual man that is totally alien to his surroundings. In Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby, the Scrivener", he describes the strange personality of a particular "quiet clerk" (85). Bartleby's "passive resistance" baffles his employer, the Lawyer, and often annoys his fellow employees (85). Though no one truly understands Bartleby's actions, the Lawyer tries to treat him the way the Bible commands us to treat others (98). A reader might surmise that the Lawyer tries to accommodate Bartleby's insubordinate actions under any circumstances (Dilworth 2 of 11). Some of the other co-workers are not as patient and kind toward Bartleby's odd behavior. One thinks of him as "lunatic" and another wants to kick him out of the office (93). In the beginning of the story the setting takes place in a Wall Street law office. Ironically, the ending of the story is a prison setting. Through the quiet and stubborn character traits that the "unaccountable scrivener" possesses and the symbolism of the brick walls that Bartleby continually stares at, it would be easy to assume that there is an autistic struggle within Bartleby's mind (97).

Most of this story emphasizes the intensely unusual quiet nature of Bartleby. When the Lawyer found Bartleby living in his law office and asked him to find another place to live, Bartleby “remained standing mute and solitary in the middle” of the room (103). Bartleby only retired silently back to his make shift home after the confrontation (103). Later, the Lawyer advised Bartleby that he was fired from the law office, but Bartleby never replied (107). Bartleby was thought of as “harmless and noiseless” like the old chairs in the office (106). He “never spoke but to answer” (98). Bartleby’s silence spoke volumes to everyone around him; however, no one knew what he was saying.

There was also a stubborn side to Bartleby that the Lawyer couldn’t understand and had no idea how to react to. When Bartleby preferred not to do the work assignments his boss requested, the Lawyer wasn’t sure if he should acknowledge it (96). At one point, the Lawyer was convinced that Bartleby must have a problem with his vision (101). Bartleby assured his boss that he would not copy again, even if his vision became “entirely well” (102). Bartleby stubbornly occupied the law office even after his boss fired him and moved the business to another building (108-109). Bartleby refused to leave the premises saying, “No: at the present I would prefer not to make any changes at all”, and he was taken to jail (110). Even after Bartleby was imprisoned, he refused to eat and soon died from starvation (112). Bartleby was severely stubborn, even to the death. An Autistic disorder would cause both quiet and stubborn personality traits and unless it is diagnosed, most people could not relate him.

Bartleby seems to be fixated on the walls both in the Law office and in the jail. The mention of many walls throughout the story symbolizes Bartleby’s inner struggle and hopelessness (Goldleaf 1 of 2). Wall Street is an important verbal symbol in this story (Goldleaf

1 of 2). Bartleby would stand all day looking out his office window, with only a view of a dead brick wall (98). Bartleby's whole existence seems to be revolved around the "brick walls" that surround him. Bartleby grows more and more passive as the walls seem to close in on him (Goldleaf 2 of 2). Even the "tombs" refers to him being trapped within walls in a literal sense (110). Bartleby now occupied a cell and the prison yards (112). In the end, Bartleby left life by staring at the courtyard walls (112). Bartleby always seems to be trapped by the walls he has set up in his own mind. Again, this could be related to the Autistic battle going on in Bartleby's mind.

An Autistic diagnosis would help answer all the puzzling behavioral questions presented in this short story. Autism is a common term used to explain "conditions that involve difficulties in social relationships and communication" (O'Brien 5). Restricted interests and repetitive behavior is also a core symptom of Autism Spectrum Disorder (O'Brien 7). In order to understand Autism a little better, one needs to know that people with this disorder rarely have friendships and romantic relationships (Waltz 351). Bartleby's whole personality is that of incommunicability (Pinchevski 1 of 16). This would interlink key issues in "critical theory, cultural critique, and philosophy of language and communication" to autistic theory (Pinchevski 1 of 16). Also, the fact that Bartleby has a problem forming friendships, has intense absorption in certain subjects, and has odd postures, points toward Autism (Pinchevski 2 of 16). Some people might think of Bartleby as being an alien (Hacking 1 of 11). Of course, Bartleby is not an alien, but interactions among his fellow human beings prove to be a challenge for him. With all that is known today about Autism, it would be reasonable to assume that this is Bartleby's problem.

Bartleby had a hard time fitting in with his surroundings and the people around him.

Bartleby's strange behavior was not diagnosed when this story takes place. Even today, it is difficult to comprehend the odd demeanor of an Autistic person. To most people, Bartleby only seems to be strangely quiet and stubborn, but now more is known about Autism and those character traits can be understood and sometimes treated. The Lawyer and the other employees were unfamiliar with Bartleby's weird personality and each of them treated him completely different. At least, the Lawyer attempted to show Bartleby compassion and generosity, because they are both "sons of Adam" (98). How would anybody treat a person that occupied their business and refused to work or leave? Probably not like the Lawyer did.

Work Cited

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