
Diagnosing Bartleby

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ABSTRACT When we first encounter Herman Melville’s short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, it is hard to imagine the multitude of meanings it contains and the interpretations it inspires. However, after a thorough analysis, we see how Melville’s genius manages to offer us political, psychological, economic and other ways of reading it. This paper’s main focus will be the psychological interpretations, i.e., Bartleby as an example of mental illness. Throughout the years, this character has been diagnosed with a number of conditions – depression, anorexia, agoraphobia, schizophrenia, etc. This paper will examine the likelihood of Bartleby having these conditions by comparing Bartleby’s “symptoms” with those of each mental illness, and if it is at all possible to diagnose someone just through the view someone else gives us of them, in this case through what the narrator tells us about Bartleby. Offering an alternative interpretation to Bartleby’s “I would prefer not to”, this paper will also briefly touch upon the political interpretations of Melville’s story.

KEYWORDS Bartleby, mental illness, political, psychological

1. INTRODUCTION

When we first encounter Herman Melville's 1856 short story *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*, it is hard to imagine the multitude of meanings it contains and the interpretations it inspires. However, after a thorough analysis, we see how Melville's genius manages to offer us political, psychological, economic and other ways of reading it. This paper will focus on the psychological interpretation – Bartleby as an example of mental illness – and will touch upon the political interpretation – Bartleby's silent protest – of the work.

Looking at the story from a psychological perspective, Bartleby can be “diagnosed” with several mental disorders such as depression, anorexia, agoraphobia, etc. The condition, whichever it may be, may have first developed during Bartleby's time as a clerk in the Dead Letter Office, a grim place where letters go to die. Cleverly guiding us through the story, Melville reveals this at the very end, making us re-examine some of our thoughts about Bartleby. While some critics agree with this view, others oppose it and propose other origins of Bartleby's troubles.

What can be said for sure is that during the course of the story Bartleby's condition worsens – he loses interest in doing his job, does not want to leave the office and does not eat. I am going to attempt to show why this is the case by looking at the disorders most commonly associated with him.

2. DEPRESSION

Depression is a disorder that is widely spread in today's society. Some of the symptoms associated with it are “persistent sad, anxious, or ‘empty’ mood”, “loss of interest or pleasure in hobbies and activities”, “appetite and/or weight changes”, “moving or talking more slowly” etc. (NIMH 2016a). Following Bartleby's behavior throughout the story, it is easy to determine the presence of some of these symptoms.

One of the strongest indications of his depressive nature are his "dead-wall reveries", as Melville (1856 14, 21–22) calls them. After losing interest in doing copying, something that he seems to enjoy doing, at least at the beginning of the story, he spends most of his time staring at the wall outside his window. The lethargy that seems to envelop him is all-encompassing.

His appetite, to which I will pay greater attention when analyzing his connection to anorexia, can be viewed as another symptom of depression. "He lives, then, on ginger-nuts, thought I; never eats a dinner, properly speaking; he must be a vegetarian then; but no; he never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts" (Melville 1856, 9). From this quote, we can see that Bartleby's eating habits are quite irregular and that he eats food that has almost no nutritional value.

Indeed, what Melville's (1856, 14) narrator calls "all the quiet mysteries which I had noted in the man" can be in some way seen as manifestations of his depressive state. Further on in the paper, it will be made clear that many of these symptoms also coincide with other disorders, and it may even be said that depression can be viewed as an accompanying condition of one of them, and not as a solitary infliction on Bartleby's mental health.

3. ANOREXIA AND AGORAPHOBIA

Anorexia and agoraphobia surface as two following conditions that can be used to analyze Bartleby's behavior and disposition. Certain indications of their coexistence can be observed in the character of Bartleby as will be made clear by Desmarais (2011) and Brown (1987).

Anorexics exhibit symptoms such as "extremely restricted eating", "extreme thinness (emaciation)", "brittle hair and nails", "dry and yellowish skin", "lethargy, sluggishness, or feeling tired", etc. (NIMH 2016b). Having these symptoms in mind, the easiest connection to make between Bartleby and anorexia as a disorder would be the descriptions of his appearance. Some of the phrases which Melville (1856) uses to describe Bartleby,

such as “lean visage” (12), “cadaverously gentlemanly *nonchalance*” (12), immediately invoke the image of a person with a rather sickly appearance.

Desmarais (2011, 5) states: “As many studies show, anorexics prefer to retreat from social life and seek out places of silence and solitude, where they are able to regulate meagre meals and live on virtually nothing. This is how the narrator describes Bartleby’s routine.” This shows another side of Bartleby’s anorexia insofar as, as previously mentioned, he refuses to take in any nourishment and lives entirely on ginger nuts.

The development of Bartleby’s anorexia is slow, and Melville gives us an indication to the importance of Bartleby’s eating habits by using metaphors connected to food when describing his working habits. “As if long famishing for something to copy, he seemed to gorge himself on my documents. There was no pause for digestion” (Melville 1856, 6). Everything Bartleby does is with the aim “to remain autonomous and self-contained” and “ultimately he refuses to *take in* any nourishment, but this is prefigured in the text by his refusing to *take on* more work” (Desmarais 2011, 2).

Desmarais (2011) also talks about what Brown (1987, 137) calls Bartleby’s “propinquity to walls” and which is related to agoraphobia as a possible explanation of Bartleby’s behavior. “Agoraphobic fears typically involve characteristic clusters of situations that include being outside the home alone; being in a crowd or standing in a line; being on a bridge; and traveling in a bus, train, or automobile” (Bressert 2017).

To shield themselves from these situations, agoraphobics avoid being out in public and prefer confined spaces whenever possible. This kind of behavior is evident in Bartleby – he prefers not to run any errands out of the office and in the latter parts of the story prefers not to move at all from his “hermitage” (Melville 1856). Discussing the walls in the story, Desmarais (2011, 6) identifies, aside from the obvious material walls that surround him, the psychological walls which Bartleby has erected to defend himself: “As long as he can stay in one place, he is content and quite literally ‘contained.’ The walls which surround him give him a sense of place, if not identity,

and there is a certain security in this. These external and inner walls are of course interrelated. Bartleby's physical environment metaphorically figures his psychological barricades."

While Desmarais (2011) adopts what one can say is more or less a purely psychological interpretation of Bartleby's agoraphobia, Brown (1987) infuses her interpretations with connections to marketplace and economy. According to Brown (1987, 136), the agoraphobia that developed in 19th century America is "literally, fear of the marketplace" and the antidote to this condition is domesticity. Connecting the condition to Bartleby, Brown (1987, 137) writes: "In his propinquity to walls and in his preference for his own impenetrable postures, Bartleby presents an extreme version of such a model: in 'his long-continued motionlessness' he achieves an 'austere reserve,' the ideal of domesticity within Wall Street."

With his behavior – refusing to do work, his "dead-wall reveries", his motionlessness – Bartleby "effectively achieves the hermitage and privacy that the lawyer imagines his establishment provides" (Brown 1987, 147). In addition to this, Brown (1987, 147) concludes that "Bartleby seeks to empty the domestic of the economic, to establish an impregnable privacy."

Brown (1987, 147–148) goes on to discuss anorexia in a similar context, connecting it to agoraphobia, as well as to the marketplace and the economy: "Anorexia, somewhat contrary to its name, is not the condition of being without desire but the enterprise of controlling desire. That is, the anorexic wants to not want and to this end tries not to consume, or to undo consumption."

The attempt of a person to shield themselves from the influences of the world and to preserve the sense of self they have can be identified as an element of both agoraphobia and anorexia. Anorexia goes one step further in this attempt because "in the logic of anorexia's perfection of agoraphobia, death best preserves the self" (Brown 1987, 150).

What best illustrates this is Bartleby's motionlessness, which is so all-encompassing that the narrator perpetually compares him to objects.

Towards the end of the story, Bartleby also tells the narrator: “I like to be stationary” (Melville 1856, 25). Brown’s (1987, 150) view that Bartleby “elaborates death as the best method of self-preservation” is not that different from Beja’s (1978) petrification stance in viewing Bartleby as a case study for schizophrenia, which will be examined in the next part of this paper.

4. SCHIZOPHRENIA

Schizophrenia is probably the most serious disorder of all that I have examined so far in this paper. While there is no consensus on how and why schizophrenia develops, scientists agree that genes, environment, and different brain chemistry and structure are factors in its development (NIMH 2016c).

When doing a psychological study on a fictional character, it is quite hard to determine how and why this disorder has developed and if it is indeed the right disorder. However, Beja (1978) states that “a clinical analysis of Bartleby would probably identify him as at least schizoid, probably schizophrenic” (556), specifying his probable diagnosis as “schizophrenia, catatonic type, withdrawn” (557). Some of the “symptoms” discussed before, for example his motionlessness, his “dead-wall reveries” etc. are also given as possible proof by Beja (1978) of Bartleby as a schizophrenic. However, this is the first time his famous phrase “I would prefer not to” (Melville 1856, 7) comes up as a symptom, or as Beja (1978, 557) says, Bartleby is “compulsively prone to repetitive acts or phrases.”

The basis for most of Beja’s (1978) analysis are R. D. Laing’s theories pertaining schizophrenia. An emphasis is put on “defining” normalcy and how it relates to Bartleby. The term “normal” is a restrictive and, in a sense, even a violent term that excludes a manner of human experiences, putting a pressure on people who are different to adapt to the majority’s opinion of what “normal” truly is. In this regard, Beja (1978, 560) believes that “we may come to look upon Bartleby’s mode of adaptation as a pathetic attempt to make himself truly

‘sane,’ and that for Bartleby “schizophrenia becomes a refuge – the awful result of a desperate attempt to avoid insanity.”

One of the most important connections to Laing’s theories that Beja (1978) makes is the importance of petrification as one of the “forms of anxiety encountered by the ontologically insecure person” (Laing 1965, 43, quoted in Beja 1978, 563) for Bartleby. “*Petrification* entails a retreat into stasis or even catatonia which is one of those modes of self-preservation by which we are accomplices in our self-destruction. One may so dread being ‘petrified,’ ‘turning, or being turned, from a live person into a dead thing, into stone’ that the terror brings about what is feared” (Beja 1978, 563).

As previously mentioned when discussing agoraphobia, Bartleby uses the words “I like to be stationary” (Melville 1856, 25) when asked what he would like to do. In fact, his preference for stasis is so great that at one point he simply stops moving and being active in any sort of way, in other words, he becomes “a perpetual sentry in the corner” (Melville 1856, 9). As an answer to the question of why Bartleby would “prefer” to become something else than a human being, to be as motionless as an object, we find multiple examples in the story of Bartleby being compared to an object, for example “he had become a millstone to me” (Melville 1856, 18), “like the last column of a ruined temple” (19), “you are as harmless as any of these old chairs” (22). As Beja (1978, 564) concludes: “Surely at least one of the sources for Bartleby’s having become a ‘thing’ is that he has been looked upon and treated as one.”

The tragedy of Bartleby’s attempt to defend himself against the world in such a way is that “like so many psychological defenses, petrification is not merely futile but more destructive than what it is supposed to provide a defense against” (Beja 1978, 564).

In order to protect himself from the world, Bartleby may have also created what Laing calls a “false self” – a performative version of the self “that one has in the outer world, which relates with that world and is

observed by others” (Beja 1978, 565), but which in no way contains any part of the true, inner self. This false self usually functions impeccably and gives no indication to others that it is there. In *Bartleby’s* case, this is his “façade” as the prefect copyist, until faced with a request this self can no longer comply with. The longer this protective shell, or rather wall that has been erected around the true self exists, the more divorced from reality this person becomes. The fate of the true self is that it remains “transcendent, unembodied, and thus never to be grasped, pinpointed, trapped, possessed” (Lang 1965, quoted in Beja 1978, 565).

This divided form of existence also means that the loss of the false self also means losing the connection to the rest of mankind. “In repudiating the false self – the self after all that relates to others, however ‘falsely’ – one repudiates all contact with other people. *Bartleby* obviously does that...” (Beja 1978, 565).

The source of *Bartleby’s* extreme dissociation, as well as his possible schizophrenia, is extremely hard to pinpoint, even after taking into account an extensive analysis such as Beja’s (1978). However, Beja (1978, 567) believes that “in the brutal parlance of everyday life, *Bartleby* dissociates himself from the outer world because he can no longer take it.”

5. “I WOULD PREFER NOT TO”

People suffering from mental disorders often develop an almost excessive politeness as a defense mechanism. *Bartleby’s* polite “I would prefer not to” can be interpreted as such. However, because *Bartleby’s* internal struggle is not seen, people often perceive him as disrespectful and even arrogant in his constant assertion of a preference – not to work, not to relocate, not to obey instruction. There are times when the narrator perceives *Bartleby* in this way: “It was rather weak in me I confess, but his manner on this occasion nettled me. Not only did there seem to lurk in it a certain calm disdain, but his perverseness seemed ungrateful, considering the undeniable good usage and indulgence he had received from me” (Melville 1856, 6).

A connection between the phrase and Bartleby's mental state can be found in Beja (1978) and Desmarais (2011), both of whom interpret the phrase as connected to the mental illnesses they examine, i.e. schizophrenia and anorexia. While Beja (1978) views it as a symptom, we can say that Desmarais (2011) finds in it another quality, apart from a simple manifestation of anorexic preference.

Beja (1978, 557) lists as one of Bartleby's symptoms of schizophrenia the fact that he is "compulsively prone to repetitive acts or phrases." He uses it as one of his rare means of communicating his emotions and desires to others, and, as mentioned previously, it is not always readily and easily understood, for Bartleby has "no" way of expressing himself in another way and maybe even explaining things further. "Still, if Bartleby's refrain of 'I would prefer not to' is a sign of anguished mental illness, it is also his forceful psychic response to existence on this earth" (Beja 1978, 562).

As the story goes on, Bartleby's "preferring not to" "becomes more and more encompassing until in the end it becomes all-inclusive – until, indeed, it refers to all of life and living. For poor Bartleby would prefer not to" (Beja 1978, 567).

Desmarais (2011, 5) views the phrase as a representation of "the paradoxical nature of anorexic behavior." Her linguistic analysis of the word *prefer*, "a comparative verb ... articulated ... as an absolute", characterizes it as "both illusive and allusive. Unspecific in what it refers to, the world alludes to a choice which it denies" (Desmarais 2011, 2).

For Desmarais (2011, 5), "I would prefer not to" is not merely a defense mechanism, but a "mantra of the dispossessed and unlocated" and "another wall between him and external reality" that is "more impermeable than any person can understand."

Bartleby's refrain also connects with the political interpretation of this story. His "I would prefer not to" is seen as an excellent example of passive resistance as a protest form. As a contrast to the defense mechanism thesis, Gullestad (2010, 403) stated the following: "Rather than a victim

whose passivity is seen as an impotent defense mechanism, Bartleby's generic reply is here treated as an *active*, potentially revolutionary force. This has even led to some viewing his passivity as a possible ideal for liberatory politics of today, either as a part of a larger strategy or in itself."

6. CONCLUSION

Even after this extensive analysis, there is no way to objectively say which condition Bartleby really "has" since Bartleby's symptoms are seen through the eyes of the narrator and we find out very little from the "patient" himself. He may have one or more of them coexist within him. Diagnosing a fictional character is also a very controversial practice and is viewed by some critics as very constricting. This paper has in no way the intention to exclude all other possible interpretations, but to present the psychological one in more detail.

Despite all this, many people will find themselves identifying with him and being sympathetic with his condition, especially if they have experienced something similar themselves. Hopefully, papers such as these and characters such as Bartleby will help with the breaking of the stigma around mental illness.

If Bartleby's actions are seen as a form of aware action, he can be classified as one of the legendary protesters of literature.

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