

Take Home Exam

Question 15.

Russell J Lowke, January 20th, 2003.

(Undergraduate)

Question: "Write an essay on the allegorical method in Hawthorne's 'Young Goodman Brown' and Melville's 'Bartleby.'"

Allegory is a term from the Greek root meaning “to speak other than openly.” The American authors, Nathaniel Hawthorne in *Young Goodman Brown* and Herman Melville in *Bartleby, the Scrivener* employ much allegory to express themselves “other than openly” with regard to their environments. Melville indulges in an allegorical autobiography expressing his entrapment as a failed writer and his resistance to conformity, and he focuses on the consequences of non-participation. Hawthorne expresses dissatisfaction with the religious Puritan orthodoxy in which he was raised, its hypocrisy, its zealous advocacy of religious worship, and its conviction of the natural depravity of “fallen” man. Hawthorne criticizes Puritans for seeing the world in black-and-white and for ignoring its grays. Melville’s character, “Bartleby” is entrapped by his inability to do anything but write, and, in the end, his failure to do even that. The physical walls around him symbolize his state of mental imprisonment. Hawthorne’s character “Goodman Brown,” is entrapped by his own beliefs, and his community’s religious beliefs and expectations. Melville uses a city setting, expressing allegory through actions and professions of his characters. Hawthorne uses a country setting since his allegory is expressed through symbolism and the names of his characters.

Melville’s *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is about Bartleby, a former clerk from the Dead Letter office at Washington, who is hired at a law office in Wall Street as a copyist. Bartleby begins refusing to comply (“I would prefer not to”) with certain routine obligations, such as proofreading manuscripts and running errands. He becomes a room bound anorexic, dissatisfied with his job duplicating legal papers (a scrivener) for a living, much like a human Xerox machine.

Although Melville is today an author of great renown, in his own time he was a failed writer. Of the 3000 original copies of his famous work, *Moby Dick*, 2500 copies burned in an 1853 warehouse fire, along with most of his other works.¹ *Moby Dick* was never reprinted in Melville's time. In August 1847, Melville married Elizabeth Shaw, daughter of Judge Lemuel Shaw, the chief justice of Massachusetts. For much of Melville’s life he lived off the generosity of his father-in-law. Judge Shaw helped the Melville family finances while Melville went on writing instead of getting a job; his family received a total of at least \$63,370 during his life, and they lived rent-free from 1851 onward.²

Bartleby’s demise stands for Melville’s own death as an artist, walled in, scribbling

¹ "Melville, Herman" *Encyclopædia Britannica* <<http://www.britannica.com/>>

² William Charvat, “Melville’s Income,” *American Literature*, XV (November, 1943), 251-261.

meaninglessly, essentially misunderstood by those about him. The papers Bartelby copies are like Melville's books, written and unsuccessful, and left without an audience. Melville suspects himself to be laboring futilely and mindlessly, creating nothing but copies of other writers' works, which are, in short, "dead letters." Melville became a recluse, increasingly so to the point that some feared for his sanity.³ Bartelby is also a recluse. Bartleby is an antihero, wracked by "pallid hopelessness", "dead-wall reveries" and "periods he would stand looking out, from his pale window behind the screen, upon the dead brick wall." This "story of Wall-Street" implies a dead end, an obstruction, a wall, much the same way that Melville himself had come to a wall in his progress as a writer. Bartleby is sick and suffering spiritually, he is a victim without willpower and is weakened by the pity of his would-be benefactor.

The strained and complex relationship between Melville's character Bartleby and the story's lawyer-narrator is reminiscent of the relationship between Melville and Judge Shaw. Once the warehouse fire had destroyed Melville's works, Judge Shaw felt that the best thing for Melville was other employment, or at least a rest, comparable to the bewildered lawyer-narrator's attempts to help Bartleby. Would Bartleby take some "wholesome exercise in the open air?" He would not. "Would he like a clerkship..?"⁴ No, too much confinement, but he was not particular. "How about going as a companion to Europe, to entertain some... gentleman?"⁵ No, he liked to be stationary. Would he go home with the lawyer-narrator—"not to my office, but my dwelling"⁶ No, he would prefer to make no change at present.

The lawyer-narrator requests of Bartelby, "That in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable:—say so, Bartleby." To which Bartelby gives the "mildly cadaverous reply" of, "at present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable."⁷ Judge Shaw must frequently have felt Melville not always reasonable. Melville was of course grateful, yet there was likely an undercurrent of anguished annoyance and stubbornness. Melville expresses this stubbornness other than openly through Bartelby. Melville may have paid thanks for the gifts of Judge Shaw, and accepted graciously all the terms that accompanied them, but he probably would have *preferred*

³ "Melville, Herman" *Encyclopædia Britannica* <<http://www.britannica.com/>>

⁴ Herman Melville, "Bartleby, the Scrivener," *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Sixth Edition. (New York: Norton, 2003): 2351.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Herman Melville, 2352.

⁷ Herman Melville, 2343.

not to, as expressed through Bartleby's constant rebuff, his mild and firm dismissal, "I would prefer not to."⁸ Melville prefers to satirize unobtrusively his pitying benefactor-tormentor as the lawyer-narrator, expressing his own sympathies through Bartleby who desires "not-to," who desires to drop out, to die spiritually and withdraw from the world.

Symbolically, Bartleby may also be interpreted as an allegorical representation of a Christ anti-hero. Bartleby, like Christ, refuses to defend himself, and the relationship between the narrator and Bartleby is reminiscent of the relationship between humankind and Christ. Though Melville's story is ostensibly not particularly Christian, there are passages that support a Bartleby-Christ. Bartleby cares not for hardships on his body, but for the confinement of his soul. The lawyer-narrator perceives that, "The scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder. I might give alms to his body; but his body did not pain him; it was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach."⁹ The lawyer-narrator concludes that he should soothe his anger and instead temper it with mercy: "when this old Adam of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled him and threw him. How? Why, simply by recalling the divine injunction: 'A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.' Yes, this it was that *saved* me."¹⁰ The lawyer-narrator perceives Bartleby as a test, and is saved through his merciful demeanor. Here, Melville mentions the "old Adam of resentment." The Biblical Adam is a symbol Nathaniel Hawthorne frequently alluded to.

Unlike Melville, Hawthorne enjoyed tremendous success as a writer. His gothic novel, *The Scarlet Letter*, established him during his lifetime as one of America's preeminent writers and rewarded him with a good living. Hawthorne was born on Independence Day, 1804, in Salem, Massachusetts. He was descended from Puritan immigrants and his ancestors had lived in Salem since the 17th century and had been witness to the Salem witch trials. Hawthorne set his stories in New England during the times of active religious strife. His earliest American ancestor, William Hathorne (Nathan added the *w* to Hawthorne when he began to write), was a magistrate who had sentenced a Quaker woman to public whipping. William's son John was one of three judges in the Salem witchcraft trials of 1692.¹¹ Hawthorne alludes to the Quaker whipping in *Young Goodman Brown*, when the Devil mentions Young Goodman Brown's ancestors, saying that, "I [the Devil]

⁸ Herman Melville, 2336.

⁹ Herman Melville, 2342.

¹⁰ Herman Melville, 2348.

¹¹ "Hawthorne, Nathaniel" *Encyclopædia Britannica* <<http://www.britannica.com/>>

have been... well acquainted with your family as with ever a one among the Puritans... I helped your grandfather... when he lashed the Quaker woman so smartly through the streets of Salem.”¹²

Hawthorne ties the main character to himself, and provocatively tarnishes the moral character of his puritan ancestors.

Hawthorne uses character names as direct symbols. In regard to Young Goodman Brown, the “Young” infers the character to be naive and new at life, “Goodman” suggests him to be self-righteous, thinking himself a good man, while “Brown” indicates the name of a commoner. In full, the name Young Goodman Brown implies an average naive and self-righteous Puritan, a biblical Adam before his fall from grace. Brown’s “aptly named”¹³ wife, Faith, is a symbol of Goodman’s faith in God. When Brown says “My love and my Faith... this one night I must tarry away from thee,”¹⁴ he is referring not only to his wife but also to God. As the Puritans would leave their faith “at home” and set out on a journey apart from their bride so, too, does Brown. When Brown arrives late to his meeting with the Devil, he claims that “Faith kept me back awhile,”¹⁵ meaning that not only his wife Faith physically kept him back, but that his faith in God psychologically held him back. Later, Brown refuses to travel any further lest his “Faith should come to any harm.” He exclaims, “Why I should quit my dear Faith,” and soon dreams of being back “in the arms of Faith!”¹⁶ In other words, Brown is afraid to harm his faith in God, he sees no reason to quit God’s faith, and wishes to be back in the arms of his faith/God.

Depending on the reader’s interpretation the entire allegory of *Young Goodman Brown* is incorporated into a dream. Use of dreams to convey meaning is a religious tradition inspired by the Bible, particularly the book of Genesis which relies heavily on dreams. Young Goodman Brown is an allegorical Adam who in his (Puritan) struggle for betterment overreaches his abilities and destroys himself. Hawthorne’s story is modeled after the Garden of Eden—the Biblical fall of Man. Brown is religiously and socially naive, he goes into the woods from town in search of knowledge, in search of good and evil. The woods are where the devil lives, the woods represent human nature and the unconscious. Conversely, the town is a rationalized Christianized haven.

¹² Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Yong Goodman Brown,” *Norton Anthology of American Literature*, Sixth Edition. (New York: Norton, 2003):1265.

¹³ Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1264.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1267.

Brown is led by the Devil's staff, which "bore the likeness of a great black snake."¹⁷ Later, when the staff is thrown at the feet of goody (goodwife) Cloyse, it assumes its own life, that of a serpent.¹⁸ The staff being a symbol of the snake in the garden of Eden, the snake which leads Adam to the Tree of Knowledge. The Devil also fashions for Brown a staff from a maple tree, suggesting forbidden evil—fruit from the tree of knowledge.

Hawthorne uses the color pink as a symbol. In the Bible, scarlet represents sin while white signifies purity. Thus, pink represents a blend of both purity and sin. Hawthorne talks of "Faith, with pink ribbons" inferring Faith taking on a blend of purity and sin. When Brown arrives at the Devil's ceremony, Faith's pink ribbon flutters down through the air and catches on a branch. Brown seizes it and cries out stupefied, "My Faith is gone! There is no good on earth; and sin is but a name."¹⁹ Brown will not accept what the pink ribbons stand for, a blend of purity and sin; Brown loses his faith and allegorically eats from the tree of knowledge; at this point he begins an anagnorisis²⁰ after which his eyes are open to human nature. Brown flies along the forest-path "among the black pines, brandishing his staff with frenzied gestures,"²¹ much like Adam being led out of the Garden of Eden. Once at the Devil's ceremony, he looks upon his fellow brethren, "the wretched man [Brown] beheld his Faith, and the wife her husband, trembling before that unhallowed alter."²² He judges Faith and the community as sinners. Unprepared to accept the visions he received with tolerance, he changes for the worst. When Brown awakens from his dream (or returns from his journey into the forest), he doubts the goodness of everything and everyone. Having lost his faith in man and religion, Brown no longer accepts the humanness of anyone and emerges a ruined man.

Herman Melville's *Bartleby* is the allegory of an individual who parallels psychologically Melville's self-perceived fate as a writer. Melville acquiesces in the fate of *Bartleby*, allowing the reader to feel the sadness of his situation. Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Goodman Brown* is an allegory

¹⁷ Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1265.

¹⁸ Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1267.

¹⁹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1269.

²⁰ "Anagnorisis: the recognition by the tragic hero of some truth about his or her identity or actions that accompanies the reversal of the situation in the plot, the peripeteia. Oedipus's realization that he is, in fact, his father's murderer and his mother's lover is an example of anagnorisis.

²¹ Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1269.

²² Nathaniel Hawthorne, 1271.

of a way of life of a group of religious people. Hawthorne does not sympathize with Brown, allowing him to die "a gloomy man"—thereby rejecting Brown's fate, and the fear and superstition Brown represents. Although Hawthorne makes no suggestion of freedom of choice, Hawthorne chooses not to live like Brown. Brown is the example to avoid. Hawthorne did not die a gloomy man, Hawthorne died in triumph. Melville's *Bartleby* voices freedom of choice, "I prefer not to," but fails to make a choice, choosing instead no choice. Melville seems to have been within reach of breaking out of his prison, but never did. Melville's compulsion to write was well-founded and today he is acknowledged as one of America's great authors. But, his era could not sufficiently acknowledge him—Melville could not support himself with his writing and suffered the humiliation and indignity of being supported by his father-in-law. His indignation is evident as allegory in *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. Melville died quietly, his death evoked but a single obituary notice.²³

²³ "Melville, Herman" *Encyclopædia Britannica* <<http://www.britannica.com/>>

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