
Portraits of the America as Illustrated by Bartleby the Scrivener Characters

The characters of many poems, stories, and other works of art act as critics or representations of the author's society. American writers Benjamin Franklin and Herman Melville both commented on their respective eras using this method. Franklin uses Poor Richard in "The Way to Wealth" to give voice to a new nation in the late 18th century. Likewise, Melville contemplates 19th century industrialization and laissez-faire capitalism through a nameless narrator in "Bartleby", the Scrivener. The portraits of America illustrated by these two characters reveal a disparity between the two writers' views of society. Franklin uses Poor Richard to inspire people to take advantage of the economic opportunities opened up by the new America, thus creating an optimistic view of society. In contrast, Melville's narrator, the Scrivener, is deeply disturbed by Bartleby, a social outcast, thereby critiquing the American capitalist ideal.

To turn Poor Richard into a glorification of American ideals, Franklin casts him as a model citizen who garners the admiration of his countrymen. The capitalist freedom of economic self-determination - though limited to white males - was developing into an American value during Franklin's time. Poor Richard's hard work and good financial sense reflect this ideology, and the social approval he gains honors the American system. Franklin begins crafting Poor Richard's image by giving him the status of a pop icon. Richard is a writer who creates proverbs on economics for his readers to live by. He says that when walking around town, "I have frequently heard one or other of my adages repeated with 'as Richard says' at the end on 't; this gave me some satisfaction, as it showed not only that my instructions were regarded, but discovered likewise some respect for my authority" (517). Richard is positioned as an economic role model, much like Steve Forbes or Bill Gates today.

Franklin then illustrates the public's vicarious respect for Richard's economic methodology through the character of Father Abraham, a wise old man. In a scene where the townspeople are complaining of their financial difficulties, they turn to Father Abraham for advice, and he plays the role of the stereotypical village elder, quoting one of Poor Richard's adages: "If you'd have my advice, I'll give it to you in short, for a word to the wise is enough, and many words won't fill a bushel, as Poor Richard says" (517). Here, the word "wise" emphasizes Father Abraham's trustworthiness. This saying enralls the audience, and the townspeople clamor for him to continue, establishing their respect for Father Abraham. Since Father Abraham is quoting Poor Richard, this respect is really for Poor Richard's wisdom. Father Abraham continues to

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quote Poor Richard with a number of sayings that instruct people on how to conduct their finances. The majority of these quotes advocate industry and frugality, values in line with the freedoms of capitalism. For instance, one adage reads, "Sloth makes all things difficult, but industry all easy" (518). After the sermon, the audience expresses its approval of Father Abraham's advice.

The townspeople's support for Poor Richard's sayings gives him the image of an American leader and fosters feelings of nationalism, since the peoples' faith in Poor Richard translates into a faith in American ideals. This was, no doubt, Franklin's intention, for Poor Richard is really an extension of himself. In "The Autobiography", Franklin reveals his support for American social mobility, and makes an effort to be the financial advisor of his contemporaries, thereby paralleling Poor Richard. For instance, upon the recommendation of his friends, Franklin agreed to write the latter part of his autobiography as a guide for young Americans. Furthermore, two of the thirteen virtues he advises - which are comparable to Poor Richard's proverbs - are Industry and Frugality, both notions related to capitalism (592). Since Franklin is one of the founding fathers of American independence, it is natural to attach patriotic, nationalistic sentiments to his name.

Whereas Poor Richard is a trustworthy and admirable character, whose confidence is backed by the support of his countrymen, Melville's narrator in "Bartleby", the Scrivener, becomes a confused and troubled man when his notions of society are shaken. The ensuing confusion and conflicts leave the reader questioning the authoritative processes of American capitalism. Melville represents American capitalism through the narrator and his business, a law office. The tale's subtitle, "A Story of Wall-Street" (2330), creates an immediate image of American capitalism, since Wall Street is the nation's economic power plant. Prior to hiring Bartleby, the Scrivener had found a neat order in American business. To him, the relations of authority implicit in capitalism seemed perfectly natural - they were a stable and effective way of getting tasks done. He feels very secure at the beginning of the story: "All who know me, consider me an eminently safe man" (2330). However, Bartleby's acquaintance destroys his sense of safety. Bartleby's character is something of an enigma: he is an extremely bad worker, with no concept of business relations or basic social processes. Whenever the narrator asks Bartleby to perform the tasks that are expected of him, he responds with the refrain, "I would prefer not to" (2338), thereby perplexing the narrator.

The narrator is then forced to confront the disparity between his faith in authority and American business, and his concern for Bartleby as another human being. On the one hand, the narrator blames Bartleby for causing commotion, while retaining his faith in the rules of proper business. He thinks of Bartleby as, "incurably forlorn," (2335) and a "vagrant" (2349). On the other hand,

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the narrator wonders whether he should forget their business relationship - which is to forget social expectations - and try to help Bartleby as a fellow man by keeping him employed and financially secure. Melville reveals the narrators thoughts to illustrate the dilemma. An example of this internal struggle occurs when the narrator considers throwing Bartleby out on the streets to fend for himself. Melville writes:

What shall I do? What ought I to do...Rid myself of him, I must; go, he shall. But how? You will not thrust him, the poor, pale, passive mortal - you will not thrust such a helpless creature out of your door? you will not dishonor yourself by such cruelty? No, I will not, I cannot do that (2349).

The narrator's absurd solution to the problem - relocating his entire business office - only adds to the chaos.

By distorting the narrator, a schema of American capitalism, Melville unveils the dehumanizing aspects of the 19th century American workplace. The narrator's awareness that he must decide between the rules of productivity and Bartleby's well-being forces readers to question whether capitalism is a civilized and just system. This question was more pertinent during Melville's time than it is today, because the unchecked, laissez-faire style of capitalism lacked social safeguards such as welfare and healthcare, and workers had far fewer rights. The most eminent opponent of Laissez-Faire government, Karl Marx, wrote "The Communist Manifesto" just five years prior to Melville's story, and the two works share several major themes. An online copy of Marx's Manifesto reads:

Owing to the extensive use of machinery, and to the division of labor, the work of the proletarians has lost all individual character, and, consequently, all charm for the workman...it is only the most simple, most monotonous, and most easily acquired knack, that is required of him. Masses of laborers, crowded into the factory, are organized like soldiers. As privates of the industrial army, they are placed under the command of a perfect hierarchy of officers and sergeants.

Here, Marx attacks the draining monotony and strict hierarchy typical of working-class positions in a capitalist system. Melville dramatizes these ideas in his story: Bartleby's tedious work copying documents leads to his extreme apathy, and his disregard for the narrator's authority confronts what Marx refers to as a militaristic division of labor. Melville's critique of capitalism stands in sharp contrast to Franklin's energizing nationalism.

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Many artists today have continued the social debate between Franklin and Melville. Franklin's nationalistic honor of the "American Way" has found increased support since the September 11th attack. Films like Disney's "A Miracle on Ice", which commemorates the United States Olympic Hockey Team's 1980 defeat of communist rival the U.S.S.R., opened soon after the attack, fostering patriotism and faith in America's legitimacy. Conversely, other filmmakers work to reveal the harsh realities of capitalism, recalling Melville efforts. David Fincher's hit film "Fight Club" (1998) portrays the psychological demise of a modern-day office employee, an echo of Bartleby's character. The movie ends with a chillingly feasible proletariat revolution in America.

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