

“Bartleby, The Scrivener” And “A Hunger Artist”

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A Struggle for Social Approval

The two stories “Bartleby, The Scrivener” by Herman Melville and “A Hunger Artist” by Franz Kafka were published in the years 1853 and 1922, respectively. It was an era when the world was moving towards advancement. Industrial revolution can be traced back to the late 1800’s. The 19th century was the period when America was moving towards an economic boom, and social, economic and political patterns were changing dramatically. The situation was the same in Germany in 1922 when the author wrote this story. These two stories are written by two different people at different times, but both authors were going through the same situation. On a close analysis of both stories, it can be said that the primary theme of these two stories was the issue of social acceptance of a person who refuses to change or who is finding it difficult to change. This phenomenon of society is maddening, and both authors talk about the consequences of this maddening factor.

“Bartleby, The Scrivener” is a story of a lawyer who owns a law firm on Wall Street in New York. The lawyer has three employees. He is a good scrivener in the morning but loses his ability to work in the afternoon. There is another employee named Nipper who works efficiently in the afternoon but is always uncomfortable in the morning because of his stomach troubles. And an office boy named Ginger Nut. The lawyer manages his three employees efficiently, and when his business started to boom, he hired another scrivener named Bartleby (Melville). Bartleby seemed to be an excellent worker at first, but then he began to politely refuse the work, and with time, he even refused to leave the office building when the lawyer shifted to another place (Melville). The story and characters can be taken as a whole world, where the lawyer and Bartleby represent the social system and people interchangeably.

Turkey and Nipper are like yin yang complementing each other; on the other hand, the new employee Bartleby is like a person or system who is finding it difficult to adjust to society. At first, he worked exceptionally well, and the lawyer was happy with him. But then, maybe because of personal dissatisfaction, he quit working, and all day, he used to stare at the walls. He refused to move in with the lawyer, refused to eat and also refused to move out of the office building. In the end, the new tenants had to send Bartleby to jail. Analyzing the story from this angle, it can be said that Bartleby represents a social deviant and the lawyer as a society who is unable to understand and manage a person different from the rest. This also shows how society treats a person who does not conform to the social norms of change. The story also clarifies how difficult it can be for some people to respond to a society that is changing and becoming faster and more advanced.

Analyzing the story from another angle, the lawyer represents the people in a society who react differently to a situation. At the beginning of the story, when Bartleby refuses to work for the first time, the lawyer is unable to scold him, and then when the situation gets worse, he just leaves the place and Bartleby. Although the lawyer effectively manages his other three employees, when he finds it difficult to handle Bartleby's case, he flees; this shows how people react to challenges. They leave the problem unsolved and move on.

"A Hunger Artist" is a story of a person who is an artist. He fasts for days for a living, travels from place to place with his manager, and displays his talent for fasting. People from all over the adjacent areas come to see his performance eagerly, but with each passing day, they lose their interest. Although Hunger artist was very famous, he was unhappy from the inside because of the restrictions of fasting limits forced on him. His impresario has fixed forty days for the longest period of fasting (Kafka), and the rituals performed when he breaks the fast were annoying for him. After a few years, his profession declined, and people became interested in other things. Eventually, the hungry artist ended up in a circus where he was put in a cage with the cages of animals (Kafka). He became a forgotten soul, and he died one day in the same cage buried under a heap of straws. The name-hungry artist illustrates that the author was not talking about a person but all those who have creative minds and a thirst for social acceptance.

The epoch portrayed in the story was a time when the pace of social change was fast, and society was moving towards everything new. In this story, a hungry artist is a person who is fighting for his survival. He is finding it difficult to adjust to the new world and the changing attitudes and preferences of the people. The author states that the hungry artist, even when he was famous, was not happy because of various reasons. When the hungry artist had to break the fast, certain rituals were performed, such as the doctor checking him first and then his impresario forcing him to eat. This situation shows how rituals play an important part in people's lives. Although the hungry artist saw this practice as foolish, he still had to perform it. Another fact that made him unhappy was his manager's forty-day limit. He wants to extend the time, but his manager doesn't allow it. And he gets stubborn. (Kafka). This fact shows how a society bounds the people and how the social constraints make people dissatisfied with life. When the hungry artist died, an energetic panther was put in the cage, quite the opposite of the former occupant of the cage.

Both stories are symbolic tales of self-isolation and resistance to change in society. The main characters fail to confirm the social change, and both of them waste away unnoticed and unappreciated. A similarity between the two stories is that Bartleby and the hungry artist both end up behind bars. One was in jail, and the other was in a cage and died. If we take both the characters, not as persons but as the human ability of creativity, we can say that the writers of the stories wanted to convey the social fact that in the modern world, society is killing creative and free minds, and man is bound by chains of social norms. On the other hand, the difference in both endings of the stories is that in the first story, the lawyer visited Bartleby and felt sorry for him, and in the Hungry Artist, the overseer is least affected by his death and asks the worker to dispose of him. "Well, clear this out now!" (Kafka). The word this in this line shows that the hungry artist lost his identity as a person,

which is a useless thing now. The fact that society does not approve of people who are different is maddening, and they both criticized this in their stories.

Works Cited

Kafka, Franz. *Selected Short Stories of Franz Kafka*. Modern Library, 1993.

Melville, Herman. *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. Bartleby Library, 1999.