



Isolation: Hawthorne v. Melville

by Michele R. Acosta

Isolation is one of the central themes of *The Scarlet Letter* by Nathaniel Hawthorne and of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" by Herman Melville. The manner in which each of the central characters respond to their isolation ultimately reveals their fates. Hester, the central character in the *Scarlet Letter*, is symbolic of the flaws and graces which make humans human and which have the power to alienate individuals from the rest of society. Bartleby, the central character in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," is symbolic of a dehumanizing and hopeless world which is equally isolating. The psychological affects of isolation take on a powerful meaning for Hester and Bartleby. Whether the final outcome is positive or negative depends greatly on the character's personality.

Hester has a "natural dignity and force of character" (1334) which helps to sustain her. Although she conforms outwardly to Puritan ideals by wearing drab, unbecoming clothing and covering her beauty, inwardly "the human world's law was no law for her mind" (1394). Despite the outward appearance of withdrawal, Hester's private thoughts are anything but passive. In the seven years before Dimmesdale publicly confesses and shares in the sin that they both committed, Hester does not succumb to her isolation. The passion and vivacity which had previously been an outward expression of her humanity becomes an inward struggle to maintain her humanity. Her "sad transformation" (1394) actually helps her remain human because it represents the toll taken when mankind is at odds with the world. Her flaws as well as her graces make her human.

Bartleby, on the other hand, never seems to have had an outward expression of life and is consumed by his thoughts which are described as "dead-wall reveries" (2348), implying that his thoughts are as passive as his outward appearance. He is described as "cadaverous" (2340) and as "the pallid copyist" (2341). Bartleby denies life. The narrator fears and avoids dealing with Bartleby as most humans fear and avoid dealing with death. He soon gives up on Bartleby, just as Bartleby has given up on himself, finally coming to the conclusion that "it was his soul that suffered" (2342). Bartleby eventually lies down and dies in the fetal position, leaving the reader feeling the unending hopelessness of life. The narrator discovers him "strangely huddled, his knees drawn up, and lying on his side" (2354).

Hawthorne offers a glimmer of hope for the human condition. Hester's vivid passion and beauty, her humanity, is at once her downfall and her saving grace. The ability to stand firm in the face of adversity takes a great toll, but emerging from the darkness and actively living can lead to endless possibilities. Melville's isolation represents the never-ending string of events life presents. He points to the frailty of the human condition and the ease with which an individual can become lost in his own problems. Bartleby's passivity was his ultimate downfall, leading to a hopeless death, following a worthless life.

Hawthorne, N. (1998). *The Scarlet Letter*. In N. Baym (ed.), *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* (5th edition), 1306-1446. New York: W.W. Norton & Company.

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