

Reading for Week 2 of “Misfits in American Literature”

Herman Melville, “Bartleby, the Scrivener”

<http://www.bartleby.com/129/>

Nathaniel Hawthorne, “Wakefield”

<http://www.eastoftheweb.com/short-stories/UBooks/Wak.shtml>

Or, if you prefer to listen to the story read, here are two YouTube versions, the second read by famous contemporary author, Paul Auster.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=waBwWs3O8Qg>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XHAFVvwQ4oI> (Paul Auster reading)

Edgar Allan Poe, “The Man of the Crowd”

<http://web.archive.org/web/20110209160927/http://etext.lib.virginia.edu/etcbib/toccer-new2?id=PoeCrow.sgm&images=images/modeng&data=/texts/english/modeng/parsed&tag=public&part=1&division=div1> (if this link doesn't work; try the one below - rk)
<http://classiclit.about.com/library/bl-etexts/eapoe/bl-eapoe-man.htm>

Some issues/questions to consider:

- 1) Like Franklin’s “The Way to Wealth,” Melville’s story is set in a marketplace, this time more specifically represented as “Wall Street.” What do the details of setting in the story suggest about Melville’s views of capitalism and work in America? Does the setting help to explain Bartleby’s preference not to work? Is Bartleby’s refusal to conform to Franklin’s (the American) work ethic similar after all to Rip Van Winkle’s?
- 2) Pay attention to the character and function of the narrator in “Bartleby.” What kind of person and lawyer is he? What sort of “business” does he do? Are we encouraged to think well or ill of him? Bartleby presents a test of sorts for the narrator (a form of affliction?) which the narrator understands partly as a test of Christian charity. Does he pass or fail this test? What does the conflict suggest about the relationship between Christian and capitalistic values in America.
- 3) Why does Melville make Bartleby’s background and character so mysterious? Bartleby’s demise is no laughing matter, yet there are comic elements in the story (e.g, the minor characters) and the situation at points seems comical or absurd. Why do you think Melville introduces these comic elements?
- 4) More deliberately than Rip Van Winkle, Hawthorne’s Wakefield absents himself from his wife and home for 20 years. What is it that seems to fascinate Hawthorne about this peculiar departure from the norm, so much so that he imagines for our benefit the fuller story that is only outlined in a newspaper account he recalls of a delinquent husband?
- 5) Bartleby, Wakefield and Poe’s “Man of the Crowd” are urban characters (the last two living in London). Does this make them significantly different as misfits than Rip Van Winkle, who lives in a rural setting? And what does it signal about developments in American society?
- 6) We are encouraged to view Wakefield and the Man of the Crowd as “outcasts of the universe.” What makes them outcast? Perhaps even more so than Bartleby, Wakefield and the Man of the Crowd are mysterious, the latter so much so that he is unnamed and apparently “unreadable.” Again, what are we to make of this mystery?
- 7) What is the difference between the Man of the Crowd and the narrator who follows him? Might we consider the Man of the Crowd in this regard a kind of “Everyman,” and if so, what then is the mystery about “humanity” that Poe attempts to represent?