



4-2022

The Walls That Define Us

Kaitlyn C. Nielson
Brigham Young University, knielson99@gmail.com

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Nielson, Kaitlyn C. (2022) "The Walls That Define Us," *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism*: Vol. 15: Iss. 1, Article 7.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/criterion/vol15/iss1/7>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Criterion: A Journal of Literary Criticism* by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

The Walls That Define Us

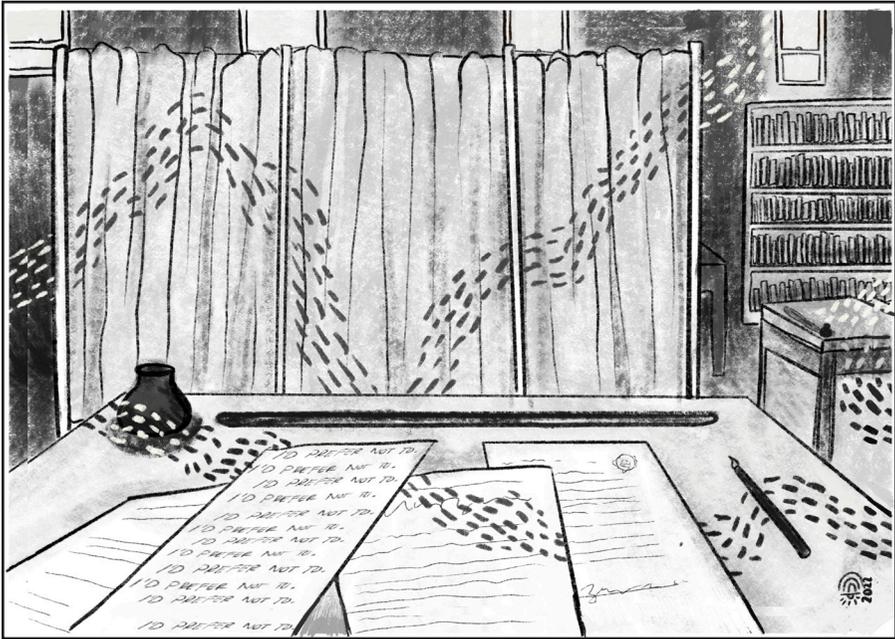
Kaitlyn C. Nielson

Herman Melville's short story "Bartleby the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" (1853) both illustrates and exploits the physical and psychological walls present in society. As seen through the arguments of critics such as Jane Desmarais and Sanford Pinsker, most literary criticism addressing walls defines Bartleby's physical or psychological impediments as a mode of passive resistance against the narrator. They further argue that although the narrator imposes the physically confining "green folding screen" upon Bartleby, Bartleby ultimately imposes physical or psychological walls upon himself to resist the narrator (Melville 10). For example, Jane Desmarais claims that Bartleby's "withdrawal from social life and refusal to take anything" diagnoses him with a figurative and literal case of anorexia. This prescribed physical disorder, Desmarais posits, was a conscious act on Bartleby's part to subject the narrator to resistance. Moreover, according to Pinsker, Bartleby's self-imposed mental disorder leads to his lack of communication. To the narrator, this tags Bartleby as an "unsettling intruder" that disrupts his stream of logic (Pinsker 18). Again, Bartleby's voluntary submission to a psychological disorder serves as a mode of passive resistance against the narrator. These readings of "Bartleby" yield many significant conclusions regarding the triumphs, consequences, and processes of resistance; however, if examined through a lens apart from passive resistance, Bartleby's physical and psychological walls shed light on the realities of being a working-class individual in New York City.

To define what psychological walls can look like, Hannah Walser suggests looking beyond passive resistance and instead viewing Bartleby's psychological walls as obedience. Similarly, she acknowledges Bartleby's physical confinement and prescribes him the psychological wall of "mind-blindness," or mental illness (Walser 314). She then proves this psychological barrier as "an inextricable echo of the narrator's own cognitive stance and status" that "Bartleby has awakened in the narrator" (325). Although Walser doesn't explicitly explore the walls within "Bartleby," projecting Bartleby as part of the narrator is a valuable idea, as it provides an alternative lens for analyzing the relationship between physical and psychological walls. Rather than interpreting Bartleby's establishment of psychological walls as a mode of resistance, what if we view his actions rather as conforming to the physical boundaries the narrator imposed? Through a close reading of "Bartleby" and its alignment with the historical context of New York City's dangerous and corrupt tenement houses of the 1830s onward, exposed in Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, I argue that figurative and literal walls, regardless of the intention behind their establishment, result in devastating and lasting psychological walls within their victims.

In a close reading of "Bartleby," one can see that the narrator imposes a rigid physical barrier upon Bartleby, unlike the barrier the other scriveners face. Before Bartleby arrived, the narrator arranged his office between the two sides of "glass-folding doors" (Melville 9). On one side worked the scriveners, and on the other worked the narrator. "According to his humor," the narrator would open and close these doors liberally (9). The glass doors serve as a barrier between the scriveners and the narrator; however, their transparency and pliability suggest this barrier is a moderate and forgiving one. On the contrary, when Bartleby begins his employment at No. __ Wall Street, the narrator separates Bartleby from the rest of the office by placing him behind an opaque "high green folding screen" (9). This screen "isolate[d]" Bartleby from the narrator's "sight" yet kept him within sound's reach (10). Unlike the boundary the other scriveners face, Bartleby's boundary proves rigid, concrete, and all the more confining.

The establishment of physical boundaries consequently imposes mental barriers upon Bartleby, as illuminated through Bartleby's inability to mentally leave the physical screen. After three days of employment in the lawyer's office, the narrator calls upon Bartleby to examine a document. Bartleby responds, "I would prefer not to" (10). Here, where most critics commence their appraisal of passive resistance, Bartleby is unwaveringly



compliant to the narrator’s first command of remaining behind the green screen. Further, the narrator explained Bartleby “never spoke but to answer” (18). As Bartleby complies to the physical barrier, he psychologically becomes incapable of working beyond the screen. Bartleby’s obedience to the physical walls the narrator defined for him are illustrated through his actions; as Bartleby’s physical autonomy is limited, his psychological freedom is also reduced. Therefore, the assumption that Bartleby deliberately avoids and declines work seems almost malicious in that, first, the narrator placed these margins for Bartleby, and second, Bartleby literally and metaphorically remains within these limitations. As Bartleby remains behind a physical barrier, mental barriers form.

This differentiation between physical barriers in the office and their subsequent psychological walls is further seen through the juxtaposition between Bartleby and the scriveners’ physical and psychological states. Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut are portrayed as expressive and vibrant characters as the narrator details their many “eccentricities” (8). From Turkey’s drinking habit to Nipper’s “dyspeptic nervousness,” the narrator characterizes them with much color and detail (13). Conversely, Bartleby is depicted rather dully. For example, compared to Turkey’s “paroxysms,” Nipper’s “irritability,” and Ginger Nut’s “alacrity,” Bartleby wrote “silently,

palely, [and] mechanically” (8-10). Further, beyond Bartleby’s dwindling personality, he also lacks voice and assertiveness. For example, his repetitive retort, “I would prefer not to,” is contrasted with Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut’s eagerness to speak, work, and act (10). This monotony and dullness within Bartleby’s character exhibits the lack of self-expression or personality due to limitations. The stark contrast between Bartleby’s dullness and the other employees’ animated nature is due to the vast differences in which the employees are physically limited. This parallelism between the physical and mental states of the characters demonstrates how those with fewer or more pliant limitations are able to retain their agency, unlike those under strict limitations, which completely eliminate any custody of choice. As one undertakes these geographic and mental restrictions, their right and ability of autonomy is tainted, stripping them of their agency.

Now, one might question the narrator’s motivation in physically limiting Bartleby. Considering the narrator’s criticism of the eccentricities specific to Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut, in addition to the imposition of physical limitation upon Bartleby, we see how the narrator’s fear of Bartleby’s susceptibility to the others’ actions and traits instills a sense of guardianship over Bartleby. The short novel includes many occurrences where the narrator becomes exasperated with the scribes’ eccentricities. For example, the narrator suddenly feels an impulse to fire Turkey when he “moisten[ed] a ginger-cake between his lips” (9). This exploitation of the other scribes’ supposed vices contrasts with the narrator’s view of the “pitiably respectable” and “incurably forlorn” Bartleby (9). This illustrates that the narrator’s sympathy toward Bartleby is rooted in the desire to provide a sanctuary removed from the vices of the other scribes. Moreover, moving beyond insignificant annoyances, the narrator also comments on the impoverished nature of his employees as they are men whom “prosperity harmed” (8). The decisiveness on the narrator’s behalf to place Bartleby in seclusion from the other scribes, yet on the same side of the room as himself, illustrates the narrator’s sense of care and protection over Bartleby, regarding his character and financial positioning. The imposition of severe physical boundaries seems to come from an instinct to guard and protect others.

The efficacy of this charity becomes more relevant in “Bartleby” when aligned with the historic contexts, or historic walls, in which Melville wrote and in which “Bartleby” takes place. Melville and Bartleby’s nineteenth-century New York City saw the implementation and questioning of so-called

walls—complete in their physical and subsequent psychological restrictions. A pertinent wall that affected a significant fraction of the lower classes, and most likely Melville and his fictional characters, was the inhumane and impoverished tenement houses of Manhattan's Lower East Side. Beginning in the 1830s, the growing immigrant and lower-class populations were herded into expensive and tight quarters due to a lack of safer and more affordable options. The buildings' precarious construction and hazardous conditions not only altered their inhabitants' physical states, but their psychological states as well. Using the tenement housing situation of Melville's New York as an extended metaphor of "Bartleby" further illustrates that the implementation of physical walls and their resulting psychological walls occur not only in fiction, but in reality as well. This occurrence is observed through Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives*, as well as other historical documents.

Just as the narrator imposed physical boundaries upon Bartleby, the tenement houses imposed concrete and confining physical walls upon the impoverished population of New York. For a hefty price of five dollars (what would currently be one hundred and eighty-four dollars), families were crammed into "one room 12 x 12 with five families living in it" (Riis 8). Conditions of these houses were detailed as "sewers were obstructed; houses were...badly ventilated, and lighted; privies were unconnected with the sewers, and overflowing; . . . and yards were filled with stagnant water" (New York Board of Health 24). The Society for the Improvement of the Condition of the Poor similarly detailed these conditions as "crowded rear tenements in filthy yards, dark, damp basements" and "leaking garrets, shops, outhouses, and stables converted into dwellings" (Riis 10). Not possessing the financial means for better options, residents were forced to reside within the dank, dark, and crowded walls of the tenement houses. Bartleby's physically inhibiting "green screen" mirrors the "mean little cubby-holes" occupied by the tenants (Melville 10; Riis 9). Bartleby, too, along with the immigrants and lower-class inhabitants of the tenement housing, was forced within these walls out of financial necessity. Bartleby and the tenants complied to the physical walls the owners deemed theirs out of a lack of better prospects.

As illustrated in "Bartleby," the consequences of the physical walls of the tenement houses caused psychological walls to emerge within the tenants. Crippling disease and infection, immense poverty, crime, and manipulation invoked by the tangible confines: many forms of psychological walls emerged. From alcoholism to mental illness to the ultimate psychological

transformation—death—psychological walls impaired agency even more so than the physical walls. For example, a father turned to consumption to cope with the physical walls, yet instead “was unable to provide either bread or fire for his little ones” (Riis 36). Further, due to the material walls that prevented ventilation and instead promoted “foul air,” a young child died from suffocation (8). Another devastating example is when the parents of a small family “took poison together” because they had exhausted themselves trying to survive in these conditions (9). Another mother threw herself out of a window due to mental illness brought on by the tenement conditions. Countless examples illustrate the dangerous psychological impediments brought by the coercion of physical walls, and *Bartleby* proves just one more example. As the tenants’ psychological states merged with their physical states, *Bartleby* similarly morphed to the concrete confines by mentally blocking out the world outside the screen with the phrase “I would prefer not to.” Stripping them of their agency, the strict, unyielding physical walls forced the tenants to take their own lives and *Bartleby* to become mentally stagnant in his aim to escape the walls’ reach. As figurative and literal physical barriers are erected, those confined lack the ability to overcome the limitations and instead absorb and become the limitations around them. Riis concurs, as he states of the poor: “They are shiftless, destructive, and stupid; in a word, they are what the tenements have made them” (207).

Now, we must analyze the intentions behind the erection of the physical walls that cause psychological deterioration. Amidst confining and difficult times, charitable attempts to aid those in the tenement houses and the narrator’s office were offered. Originally built for wealthy family apartments, the buildings that became the tenement houses experienced a transformation that altered their nature. Riis explains this alteration through the viewpoint of the “builder of the old gateway” of the buildings that had “no thought of its ever becoming a public thoroughfare” (23). With this change from apartment style living to tenement housing, the proprietors sought solely after profit and cared little about the well-being of the inhabitants. Amidst the corrupt and manipulative money-making machine the tenement houses proved, individuals stepped up to aid when possible. For example, when a fire began on a Madison Street tenement, “some wonderfully heroic rescues were made [. . .] by the people living in adjoining tenements” when the firemen arrived late (31). Moreover, an elderly woman bathed the children of the tenements. Lastly, a Quaker man aimed to “rescu[e] the poor people from the dreadful

rookeries" by erecting a building safe from the dangers of the tenement houses. Similarly, the narrator attempts to provide relief to Bartleby by keeping him as an employee. The narrator fears Bartleby will "be rudely treated, and perhaps driven forth to miserably starve" in a different position (Melville 13). Thus, the narrator decides to "befriend Bartleby" (13). Both the narrator and people in the tenement situation offered charitable acts.

Beyond his charitable acts, the narrator likewise exhibits actions that negatively affect Bartleby; overlooking these detrimental actions by justifying them with his few charitable actions, the narrator imposes unconscious dominance over Bartleby that ultimately results in Bartleby's death. This is seen when the narrator decides to fire Bartleby and begins to plan his "management in getting rid of" him (Melville 23). Just before kicking him out, the narrator hands Bartleby his due money as well as some extra, and claims the "odd twenty" are his to keep (22). He proceeds to inform Bartleby that he can "be of service to [him]" if needed (23). The narrator overlooks his firing of Bartleby by justifying it through his small charitable act of gifting Bartleby money. Moreover, he faults Bartleby's "passive resistance" as the cause for his firing, completely neglecting his hand in imposing the physical barriers that created Bartleby's resistance in the first place (12). When asking Bartleby what type of position he would like to pursue, Bartleby claims certain positions have "too much confinement" (30). The narrator retorts, "too much confinement . . . why you keep yourself confined all the time!" (30). Further, this unconscious dominance is seen most drastically when the narrator finds Bartleby dead at the Tombs. After Bartleby had "silently acquiesced," when taken to the Tombs, the narrator arrives to find Bartleby behind the ultimate psychological wall—death (31). Although he assumed his own presence at the Tombs would be a "benefit to the scrivener," the narrator is blind to the fact that his role in imposing confines was actually what forced Bartleby into the Tombs (32). Parallel to the tenement houses, even if the narrator's intentions were rooted in charitable origins, the unconscious greed of the profit-driven proprietor got the best of him. Taken altogether, yes, the narrator's small acts of service aided Bartleby; however, as the narrator oscillates between the role of the proprietor and the role of the relief-giving neighbor, ultimately his unconscious, detrimental actions outweighed the beneficial ones. Just as the benevolent actions within the tenement houses could not cease the overall outcome for all, the narrator's few charitable actions could not save Bartleby. Tenants continued to die in fires, children still ran around dirty,

even the Quaker's safe place was eventually turned into a tenement house itself, and Bartleby ended up dying. Riis encapsulates this idea perfectly, as he states that "those who would fight for the poor must fight the poor to do it" (207). Therefore, one's lack of recognition in inflicting limitations proves that well-intended acts of charity can instead be translated into unconscious dominance.

The true nature of walls in Melville's "Bartleby" are exploited through both a close reading and further through a historic lens. The imposition of physical walls, no matter what intention propels it, plunges the walls' victims into the icy depth of psychological turmoil. Seen through the lens of a grave and prominent issue of Melville's day, Melville's explanation of society's walls calls for an urgent and weighty resolution. In fact, when searching newspapers and articles that mention the dire situation of the tenement houses before the publishing of "Bartleby" in 1853, nothing appears in the databases. The first report that raised governmental awareness was the *Annual Report* of 1866 of New York state that claims "sanitary science" was only recently a topic of "earnest interest" (7). Upon inspecting New York City, officials found that the conditions such as poor ventilation, overcrowding, and filthy living quarters, "endangered the lives of the people" (New York Board of Health 13). Shortly thereafter, the Tenement House Act of 1867 required "greater cleanliness, more frequent white-washing of hallways and rooms, improved ventilation and . . . a more careful oversight of tenement premises by owners" (New York Board of Health 6). In summary, a problem that affected thousands of lives beginning in the 1830s was only exposed in a governmental report in 1866, and only further exposed to the public with the publishing of Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* in 1890. Long before any of this information surfaced, Herman Melville scrutinized the literal walls that confined low-paying Wall Street workers to their desks and impoverished people to the tenement houses.

Melville's "Bartleby" is revolutionary because it attacked societal problems of its time before other authors did, and because it transcended time to battle the physical and psychological walls that inhibit society in all eras. In "Bartleby," the narrator assumed his intentions of confining Bartleby behind the green screen were charitable. Although the narrator assumed his intentions of physically confining Bartleby were charitable, the walls ultimately resulted in Bartleby's psychological impediments and death. As Riis puts it, walls "are often carried up to a great height without regard to the strength of the foundation walls" (Riis 7). Ultimately, what is at stake here are

the current and future societal walls that emerge from the foundations we set as a society, such as the weak foundations the narrator and the proprietors of the tenement houses established that resulted in devastating psychological inhibitions. It was too late for thousands of lives when the *Annual Report* of 1866 and Jacob Riis's *How the Other Half Lives* were published. Hence, before it is too late, we must ask ourselves what foundations are supporting the physical walls of immigration, welfare aid, equality, education, unemployment, and other current issues. Further, we must exploit unintentional biases lurking within these walls and analyze potential psychological walls that could emerge because of them. If the intentions, or "foundations," as Riis puts it, are not examined and tested for faulty motive, psychological disasters will ensue, similar to the deaths of Bartleby and the tenants. Surely, this is what Melville meant when he exclaimed "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity,"—if precaution isn't taken now, each individual will suffer psychological death, just as Bartleby does (34).

Works Cited

- Desmarais, Jane. "Preferring Not to: The Paradox of Passive Resistance in Herman Melville." *Journal of the Short Story in English. Les Cahiers De La Nouvelle*, Presses Universitaires D'Angers, 13 June 2008, journals.openedition.org/jsse/575.
- Melville, Herman. "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street." *Melville's Short Novels*, edited by Dan McCall, 1st ed., W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2002, pp. 3–34.
- New York Board of Health. *Annual Report of the Metropolitan Board of Health of the State of New York*. Vol. 1, 1867.
- New York Board of Health. *Annual Report of the Metropolitan Board of Health of the State of New York*. Vol. 2, 1868.
- Pinsker, Sanford. "'Bartleby the Scrivener': Language as Wall." *College Literature*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1975, pp. 17–27.
- Riis, Jacob A. *How the Other Half Lives: Studies among the Tenements of New York*. Martino Publishing, 2015.
- Walser, Hannah. "The Behaviorist Character: Action without Consciousness in Melville's 'Bartleby'." *Narrative*, vol. 23 no. 3, 2015, p. 312–332. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/nar.2015.0019.