Melville’s BARTLEBY, THE SCRIVENER

In “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” Melville alludes to a famous murder that took place on Wall Street, 17 September, 1841. On that day, John Colt murdered Samuel Adams, the proprietor of a printing shop, in cold blood. Though this allusion may seem straightforward, given Melville’s love of playing with language and allegory, it seems there is more to this story than simply a reference. Melville’s reconstruction of the murder, as told through the lawyer, takes on an allegorical level of its own. If one reads the lawyer’s account of the murder of Adams in conjunction with man’s first murder in the Bible, it would seem Melville had Cain’s malicious act in mind when he used the factual account of the murder on Wall Street.

Interestingly enough, the first noticeable correlation between both acts of murder lies in the initials of the characters involved. In both situations, the murderer and victim share the same initials: Cain and Abel; Colt and Adams. Though this is clearly simply an interesting coincidence, the notion that Melville may have had the story of Cain and Abel in mind while writing “Bartleby” becomes more fascinating when one reads the lawyer’s perspective of the Wall Street murder:

I remember the tragedy of the unfortunate Adams and the still more unfortunate Colt [. . .]; and how poor Colt, being dreadfully incensed by Adams, and imprudently permitting himself to get wildly excited, was at unawares hurried into his fatal act—an act which certainly no man could possibly deplore more than the actor himself. (661)

When comparing this statement to Cain’s murder of Abel, one can see a correlation between the two acts.

In Genesis, brothers Cain and Abel submit offerings to God. Abel’s offering is accepted, but Cain’s is rejected. This breeds resentment within Cain toward his brother, and when they are alone in a field, Cain, in a fit of rage and jealousy, kills his brother. On discovering the murder, God marks Cain with a curse that will follow him throughout his life. Cain’s reply to God’s decree mirrors the sentiments expressed by the lawyer concerning Colt’s act of murder. Cain says:

My punishment is greater than I can bear. [. . .] Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me. (Genesis 4:13–14)

As Melville’s narrator claims of the murder of Adams, Cain’s murder of Abel is “an act which certainly no man could possibly deplore more than the actor himself” (661). Further references within “Bartleby” seem to indicate that it
is very possible Melville had the story of Cain and Abel in mind while penning his tale.

In a state of fraternal pity, Melville’s safe lawyer says, “Both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam” (652). Though on the surface this allusion may be simply seen as an instance of Christian bonding, an attempt to reconcile notions of humanity and religion, let us not forget that Cain and Abel were both literally sons of Adam. Furthermore, the ambiguous nature of Melville’s short story, when reviewed in the context of Cain and Abel, seems to lend itself to the very nature of God’s dialogue with Cain after the murder has taken place. “And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And [Cain] said, I know not: Am I my brother’s keeper?” (Genesis 4:9). This question of responsibility for others plagues not only Cain, but Melville’s lawyer as well.

At wit’s end, the lawyer is tempted to take justice into his own hands and murder Bartleby; however, he dissuades himself from the act by recalling scripture: “But when this old Adam of resentment rose in me and tempted me concerning Bartleby, I grappled him and threw him. How? Why, simply by recalling the divine injunction: ‘A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another.’ Yes, this it was that saved me” (661). Throughout “Bartleby,” Melville’s narrator grapples with this question of responsibility for others. We can almost hear the lawyer asking, as Cain does, am I my brother’s keeper? The note of despair at the end of the story seems to indicate the answer is yes.

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