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### Bartleby and Krebs as Representations of Mental Anguish

Throughout the history of literature, authors have used a variety of differing afflictions to help make the characters of their stories more diverse and human. In two iconic works of American literature, “Bartleby the Scrivener” and “Soldier’s Home,” the authors Herman Melville and Ernest Hemingway create characters such as Bartleby and Krebs who suffer from psychological anguish that heavily impact their roles in the story. Bartleby refuses to do all but the most mundane of tasks as a result of his time working at the Dead Letter Office, while Krebs returns home from war with no recognition and little purpose in his life. In Melville’s “Bartleby the Scrivener” and Hemingway’s “Soldier’s Home,” Bartleby and Krebs are both embodiments of the effects of depression and a lack of motivation, and the ways that they confront their issues represent the toll that sustained mental anguish can take as demonstrated by their physical actions and dialogue with other characters.

Bartleby and Krebs greatly show their representations of apathy through their actions, or rather, their lack of action. One instance of Bartleby acting in an apathetic manner is his refusal to move from his station despite being completely alone in a desolate, soulless environment. The protagonist comes to this realization of Bartleby’s solitary and melancholic lifestyle after discovering him asleep in his office on a Sunday:

Of a Sunday, Wall Street is deserted as Petra; and every night of every day it is an emptiness. This building, too, which of week-days hums with industry and life, at

nightfall echoes with sheer vacancy, and all through Sunday is forlorn. And here Bartleby makes his home; sole spectator of a solitude which he has seen all populous - a sort of innocent and transformed Marius brooding among the ruins of Carthage? (Melville 114)

Krebs, the protagonist of "Soldier's Home," lives a similar, aimless life after returning home to his vacated town after experiencing the horrors of warfare. Krebs's lack of desire is greatly illustrated in his apathetic reasoning on not getting a girlfriend:

Now he would have liked a girl if she had come to him and not wanted to talk. But here at home it was all too complicated. He knew he could never get through it all again. It was not worth the trouble. (Hemingway 13).

In both instances, Bartleby and Krebs both act in a very unconventional manner, with Bartleby refusing to even leave the office despite being completely alone and Krebs refusing to try to get a girlfriend if it would cause any bit of trouble or inconvenience for him. This shows a feeling common to both of them: a strong lack of motivation or desire to do anything but the simplest of tasks. Their lack of action helps to solidify their gloomy nature as men broken by their time spent working in depressing environments (at the Dead Letters Office and overseas in World War 1, respectively). However, it is clear that there is a stark contrast between the two; Bartleby's situation is much more severe than Krebs's. While Krebs's lack of motivation is a common symptom of clinical depression, Bartleby's complete denial of every task is not as grounded in reality. Although their severity may differ, the way that these afflictions provide the sole reasoning for the majority of both characters' actions (or lack of action) aid in solidifying them as personifications of depression and mental anguish.

Bartleby and Krebs also provide evidence for being personifications of mental anguish through their dialogue with other characters. Bartleby's dialogue with the protagonist is a clear

demonstration of his complete lack of desire to do anything except the simplest of tasks. Each time that the protagonist suggests anything, from comparing papers to even moving, Bartleby replies with the same simple phrase: "I would prefer not to" (Melville 108). Krebs, on the other hand, expresses his misery in a more intense approach, especially when talking to his mother. Krebs conveys how his experiences have affected him when the two finish discussing his present affairs: "'Don't you love your mother, dear boy?' 'No... I don't love anybody'" (Hemingway 6). Although these responses are short, the emotion (or lack thereof) that they carry is intense.

Bartleby's response to his superior is initially believed to be absolutely preposterous, but as the story progresses, his reasoning behind it is revealed; he suffers from a major form of depression that prevents him from having any slight motivation to do almost everything as a result of his time working at the Dead Letter Office. Krebs's statement carries a similar effect to Bartleby's; after witnessing the horrors of war and coming back to little recognition from his own town, Krebs has lost the ability to feel any sort of love or empathy for other people. However, a clear contrast between what is known of the two character's mental states is created through the usage of point of view. In "Bartleby the Scrivener," the narration is in a first person style, only allowing a glimpse into the inner thoughts of the protagonist. There is no insight given to the thoughts of Bartleby or what drives him to act in the peculiar manner that he does. On the other hand, "Soldier's Home" is written from Krebs's perspective, which grants the ability to know why Krebs lives without any sort of goal (due to a lack of motivation). Despite different insights into the minds of the two characters, as their mental anguish heavily impacts the role that they play in the story as well as their dialogue with others, they represent both the afflictions that plague them and the impacts that they may have.

Because of their roles in the story, Bartleby in the story “Bartleby the Scrivener” and Krebs in “Soldier’s Home” are physical representations of mental anguish and what continual wearing down of a conscience can lead to. Bartleby never leaving the office and flat-out refusing to do tasks assigned by his superior help define him to be a man broken through years of working a depressing, psychologically-straining job, while Krebs’ lack of both desire to experience anything that could cause trouble and empathy towards all others, even his own mother, demonstrate how the horrors of war can shatter a person’s conscience. These afflictions that the characters suffer from help to differentiate them from others, but also serve to make them more relatable to all; the way that Melville and Hemingway represent the problems that these two characters face only serves to illustrate what psychological pressure could do to anyone.

### Works Cited

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