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**“Walls That Hold, Walls That Block”: The Paradox of Enclosure in Poe’s “The Raven”
and Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener”**

What does it mean to be destroyed by the very space that was supposed to protect you? Both Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Raven” and Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener” place their protagonists in enclosed spaces. A scholar’s chamber and a WALL-Street office might plausibly have served as sites of retreat or recovery, yet both texts end in total collapse, with their protagonists sealed off from any rescue that might have reached them. Colwell and Spitzer’s 1969 study first established the structural parallels between the two works, demonstrating their shared refrain, escalating question-and-answer patterns, and what Poe called “a close circumscription of space” (“The Philosophy of Composition” 984; qtd. in Colwell and Spitzer 41). Their analysis, however, remained at the level of structural correspondence. While Leo Marx’s 1953 reading of “Bartleby” as a “parable of the walls” and Graham Thompson’s analysis of the office as a disciplinary spatial site have advanced our understanding of Melville’s spatial imagination, no study has brought a spatial-theoretical lens to bear on both texts comparatively. Drawing on Gaston Bachelard’s phenomenology of inhabited space and the concept of psychological projection, this paper argues that in both works, the spaces the protagonists inhabit function not as neutral settings but as physical manifestations of their inner states. Both texts dramatize a process of inward collapse through a sustained motif of death, in which the death of the beloved, of selfhood, and of communication takes material form in walls

that externalize inner despair even as they seal off every possibility of external redemption.

From its opening stanza, “The Raven” presents a chamber that appears to extend the contours of its inhabitant’s mind into physical form. The narrator sits at midnight surrounded by “many a quaint and curious volume of forgotten lore” (l. 2), yet these books have failed to provide “surcease of sorrow, sorrow for the lost Lenore” (l. 10). The word “vainly” signals that knowledge has lost its power to console, and the scholar’s chamber, originally meant to house learning, now stands revealed as a space where intellectual refuge has been hollowed out by grief. Every surface of the room registers this transformation. The “dying ember” that “wrought its ghost upon the floor” (l. 8) turns the room’s one source of warmth into a shadow-casting figure of death, while the “silken sad uncertain rustling” of the curtains (l. 13) fills the narrator with “fantastic terrors” (l. 14) arising not from any external threat but from his own mourning consciousness, projected onto the fabric of the room. As Bachelard argues, inhabited spaces are never geometrically neutral; they absorb and amplify the emotional life of their dweller (45-46). Therefore, the chamber has become, in effect, an echo chamber of mourning.

What follows is the narrator’s consciousness actively shaping what enters this space. At two moments, he opens the chamber’s boundaries. He first opens the door, finding “Darkness there, and nothing more” (l. 24) and whispering “Lenore” into the void (l. 28). When that call meets silence, he flings open the shutter, and the Raven enters (l. 38). Both acts are initiated by the narrator himself, who is not passively invaded but actively opens the threshold to what lies outside. The irony is pointed: what the exterior sends in response is a black bird from “Night’s Plutonian shore” (l. 47), an emissary of the very darkness that already surrounds the room. The Raven then settles “upon a bust of Pallas just above my chamber door” (l. 41), taking a position that is triply elevated: above the seated narrator, above the room’s only exit, and above the

goddess of wisdom herself. As Colwell and Spitzer note, a bird whose vocabulary consists of a single word “can only remain silent” where meaningful knowledge is concerned, yet it occupies “the seat of the all-knowing” Pallas (38). From this position, the Raven presides over the narrator’s escalating inquiries: questions about its name, about “nepenthe” (l. 83), about reunion with Lenore in the afterlife (l. 93), and finally his frantic attempt to expel the bird altogether (l. 97). Each question reaches deeper into the narrator’s psyche, and each receives the same annihilating response. He displays, as Colwell and Spitzer further observe, a marked tendency toward self-torture, “making each succeeding answer echo still more of his sorrow” (42). By the poem’s final stanza, the room itself has scarcely changed. The door remains open, the lamp still burns, and yet the narrator’s soul is trapped within “that shadow that lies floating on the floor / Shall be lifted, nevermore!” (ll. 107–08). The physical space, virtually unaltered from its opening description, stands revealed as the outward form of a mind that has chosen its own tomb.

If Poe’s narrator chooses his own tomb by opening his chamber to the darkness outside, *Bartleby* inherits a space already built to confine him: an elaborate system of enclosure imposed by the economic order of mid-nineteenth-century Manhattan. The story’s subtitle, “A Story of Wall Street,” provides the first spatial clue. As Marx observes, Wall Street is not merely a commercial address but a literally walled street whose walls function as “the controlling symbols of the story” and constitute “a parable of walls, the walls which hem in the meditative artist and for that matter every reflective man” (604). The lawyer’s office repeats this logic on a smaller scale. Every window looks upon a wall: one side faces a white wall that renders the sky invisible, while the other faces “a lofty brick structure within ten feet of the lawyer’s window,” black with age (Marx 605–06). Both views are “deficient in what landscape painters call ‘life’” (Marx 606). Though the office supposedly functions as a site of productive labor under a capitalist order that

treats clerks as copying machines, it has already been drained of vitality before Bartleby arrives as a wage-earner seeking employment.

Bartleby's position within this office reveals the full architecture of his confinement: a body pressed between an immovable external wall and a fragile internal partition. The lawyer assigns him a desk by a window that once "afforded a lateral view of certain grimy backyards and bricks, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all" (Melville 2978). As Marx notes, the wall blocking the window is not permanent but a product of urban development, a man-made obstruction that Bartleby nonetheless comes to treat as "an almost metaphysical barrier" (619). What human hands built and could in principle dismantle has been fixed in his perception as an immovable condition of existence. Three feet from this wall, Bartleby is further isolated by a "high green folding screen" the lawyer installs (Melville 2978), which is the flimsiest of all the walls in or around the office. Marx describes it as a "folding" barrier that is susceptible to human manipulation and therefore an "extremely ineffectual wall" (608). Its green color, which evokes the pastoral life that in Melville's broader work signifies vitality, here functions as a false shelter; the illusion is the more pointed because the screen is installed not by Bartleby but by the lawyer, who represents the very economic order confining him. As Thompson argues, the office should be read as a spatial site whose organization of visibility, voice, and bodily distribution carries out the disciplinary logic of mid-nineteenth-century capitalism (397–99).

From this constricted position, the story traces Bartleby's progressive withdrawal through increasingly confined spaces. He shifts from copying to what the narrator describes as a "dead wall revery" (Melville 2987). When the lawyer relocates his office, Bartleby is left "the motionless occupant of a naked room" (Marx 615). His final relocation is to the Tombs, the city

prison, where walls of “amazing thickness” bear an “Egyptian character” that weighs upon the lawyer with its gloom (Melville 2997). Marx identifies the crucial irony here: there is scarcely any meaningful difference between the office and the prison, since in both spaces Bartleby confronts the same dead wall (617–18). At every stage the space contracts, the light diminishes, and Bartleby retreats further inward, until he is found curled at the base of the prison wall, dead.

Read together, the two texts dramatize the same fundamental mechanism. In each, the protagonist’s failure to accept external redemption transforms the space he inhabits into an inescapable psychological tomb, and the form this refusal takes differs sharply across the two works. In “Bartleby,” the redemption refused is tangible and explicit: employment, food, shelter, and companionship, each offered by the lawyer and each rejected in turn. In “The Raven,” it takes a stranger and more ambiguous form, since the Raven arrives in response to the narrator’s call for “Lenore” and initially carries the possibility of being an emissary from beyond. That this possibility collapses into “Nevermore” itself is part of the tragedy: what the narrator misreads as a messenger proves to be only an amplifier of the denial he has summoned.

The structural parallels first observed by Colwell and Spitzer extend into the spatial and symbolic fabric of both works, beginning with the two classical busts that preside over each protagonist’s most constricted moment. In “The Raven,” the bird perches on the bust of Pallas in a spatially stratified position, with the narrator seated below, the bust standing above the chamber door, and the Raven atop the seat of wisdom itself. A creature of single-word negation thus literally looks down on the goddess of knowledge, and on the mourner she cannot help. In “Bartleby,” a parallel moment occurs when the scrivener silently fixes his gaze upon a bust of Cicero, “the father of Roman oratory” (Colwell and Spitzer 38). Cicero does not preside over a threshold but is embedded in the architecture of the workplace, and when the lawyer eventually

relocates his office, Cicero is carried away with the furniture, as though the rational order he represents has finally conceded its irrelevance to what Bartleby has become.

The two refrains that fill the silence left by these mute busts operate through opposing mechanisms. Both are negations, “Nevermore” and “I would prefer not to,” and this shared grammar of refusal drives each protagonist toward the same disillusionment by opposite routes. Poe’s narrator pursues his destruction through active interrogation, knowing the answer yet continuing to ask. The Raven’s “Nevermore” functions as an amplifier off which the narrator’s grief reflects, magnified with every new inquiry. Bartleby’s refrain operates inversely. His “I would prefer not to” is a response, never an initiation, yet it would be a misreading to call it simply passive. The formulation asserts preference, and therefore subjectivity, even as it declines action. What looks like passivity is better understood as a sustained act of non-participation that interrupts the capitalist order by refusing to play the role it requires. Yet this refusal exacts its own cost. When the lawyer offers him employment, food, and finally shelter in his own home, Bartleby declines each in turn. His non-participation extends beyond the workplace to every form of human connection, until what began as resistance becomes refusal of life itself.

The convergence of these opposing trajectories produces an identical outcome: total inward collapse, and with it the sealing off every external possibility. Poe’s narrator refuses to accept loss, and his soul fuses with the Raven’s shadow, a shadow the lamplight itself produces even though the chamber’s physical illumination has never dimmed. Bartleby refuses food, work, speech, and kindness, and he is found curled at the base of the prison wall, dead. In both cases, what began as external architectural features have become something else entirely. The protagonists do not merely inhabit enclosed spaces; they have become the enclosure itself.

Here the terse detail that Melville reserves for the story’s final revelation acquires its full

weight. The lawyer reports, almost in passing, that Bartleby had once worked in the Dead Letter Office, handling correspondence that could never reach its recipients. The flatness of this description, its refusal to elaborate, itself mirrors the phenomenon it names. The detail reaches us as rumor, delivered in a language as detached as the letters it describes, as though the capitalist social order Melville depicts cannot process human tragedy in any other tone. These are communications sent with care that arrive at a wall of institutional silence and can travel no further. This, I would argue, is the governing image beneath both texts. The governing image beneath both texts is the paradox of enclosure itself: walls do not only hold suffering in; they hold redemption out. The narrator of “The Raven” calls “Lenore” into the darkness and receives denial; Bartleby is offered forms of care as concrete as any letter, and each is returned to the lawyer undelivered.

We return, then, to the question with which this paper began: why do these two protagonists perish when forms of rescue still reach toward them? Walls are not in themselves destructive. The paradox of enclosure lies elsewhere: walls built by the self or by society serve necessary functions. They hold grief long enough for it to be bearable, they mark out spaces where loss can be metabolized, and they provide the temporary shelter that anyone living with suffering requires. The tragedy of these two works is not that their protagonists build walls, but that they cannot eventually walk out of them. What begins as a boundary that contains pain hardens, over the course of each text, into a boundary that also blocks every form of care still trying to cross it. Neither protagonist perishes because the walls around him are unbreachable. Each perishes because he can no longer distinguish the walls that once housed his grief from the walls that now block his rescue, and neither can find the doorway out. This failure of recognition, rather than the walls themselves, is what gives Poe’s and Melville’s spatial

imagination its enduring force across genre and literary period.

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Question 10 8 / 10 pts

Raise a question or give a comment about either of the texts.

Your Answer:

The texts showcase duality of humanity and create stark contrast: expansion of the mind and a shrinking space of one own's thought. On one hand, in "The Raven", the continuous repeat words "Nevermore" spoken by the raven ultimately pushed Lenore's lover to absolute despair (從未・幽暗恐懼・對生命的絕望). Nevertheless, on the other hand, Dupin wisely captures the "poet" and "scientist" minds then solved the case by imagination. (外擴的想像視野・破案曙光・希望甚至帶有點戲謔復仇。)

Question: Does such contrast bring Poe's literary work more philosophical? Also, do the beginning scene of two texts (Room空間) indicate that we can navigate our human mind "outward" and "inward"? Which is more important? Or we should care two directions both.

It is good that you've noticed Poe's meticulous choice of settings. Setting is very important in literature in general. But when you read Poe as a Dark Romanticist, try first "observe" the setting literally. Pay attention to all components of the space, what furniture or objects are specified, and how they correspond with the characterization of the character. Then, move on and interpret the space metaphorically, meaning sometimes you read the surrounding of the character as manifestation / demonstration of their inward reality. In this way, you might find that there isn't necessarily an inward-outward contrast, but that the descriptions of inside and outside are reinforcing each other.



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The New York Stock Exchange

Question 10 10 / 10 pts

Raise a question or give a comment about this story.

Your Answer:

Melville wisely utilize the recurring motif, WALL, to symbolizes the isolation in modern capitalism. In the story, the scenario sets in WALL street New York, which operates strongly by the capitalists. Also, they isolate the officers with green fold (綠屏風), only with a view for a melancholic wall for the protagonist. Furthermore, the jail imprison Bartleby with WALLs, even he builds WALLs in his interior thought, which further illustrates by rejecting any kindness from others. (老闆要給錢他不要、要請他到他家住也不要、煮好吃的給他也不吃)

Question: Do you think the WALLs in the stories represents as a material that trap one in nihilism rejecting any form of kindness in modern capitalism society, or do you think the wall can be broken if we see the bright side, even the "DEAD LETTER" can be received and show its warmth and hope?

Plus, why does the author set weird names for the characters, except for the boss?

Quiz Score: 100 out of 100

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