It has been suggested that Herman Melville's works, *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *Benito Cereno*, are representations of the radical American innocence in his or her struggle against the constraining effects of their communities. Although the level of constraint placed on the individuals in the community may be more evident in *Bartleby the Scrivener* when compared to *Benito Cereno*, it is still present in the latter. From both stories, a number of examples can be used to reinforce this idea and these will be shown throughout in the appropriate sections.

Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* follows the notion of the struggle that the individual has against the constraining effects of the community. Here we are introduced to the character that is "pallidly neat, pitifully respectable, incurably forlorn! It was Bartleby" (Melville, 1962, p. 98). Bartleby really had no way of escaping the hold his community has on him. The working conditions that he had to endure were not at all encouraging, as even his boss admits:

> I placed his desk close up to a small side-window in that part of the room, a window which originally had afforded a lateral view of certain back-yards and brick-pits, but which, owing to subsequent erections, commanded at present no view at all, though it gave some light. (Melville, 1962, p. 90).

If any of us were ever put into these conditions, it would not come as a surprise if we were to begin acting distant and strange.

Bartleby was a scrivener or law-copyist who went about his work professionally and quietly, never making a scene or disturbance. His fellow scriveners were a different story though. Turkey was a sixty-year-old man who had what we might now call a split personality. In the morning he was very placid and gentle, but after twelve o'clock he became very fiery. Nippers, was the opposite of Turkey in that the morning was the time that saw him become distracted and irritable and the afternoon was when he was a very mild man. The two men swapped personalities in a sense around twelve o'clock (Melville, 1962, p. 85-9).

These characters each had certain luxuries that relieved them: Turkey had his ale and ginger cakes, while Nippers had his little battles with his mind. Unfortunately Bartleby had nothing to give him an escape from his tormented world. Since Bartleby had no escape, his efforts went into his work: "He ran a day and night line, copying by sun-light and by candlelight. I should have been quite delighted with his application, had he been cheerfully industrious. But he wrote on silently, palely, mechanically" (Melville, 1962, p. 90). It could be said then that the innocent Bartleby was being unrightfully taken advantage of in order to get the copying done.

Things changed in those chambers on Wall Street when Bartleby was asked to examine one of the papers that had been copied by his boss. Instead of complying with what had been asked of him, he declined with the phrase "I would prefer not to" (Melville, 1962, p. 91). For some unknown reason Bartleby did not want to be just like everyone else in those chambers. He wanted to be an individual. What people saw of him was always more along the lines of a person who did not wish to follow the orderly, set way that the community followed. Nobody knew what to do with someone who did not fit the communal mould. Bartleby was just too different, as he did not even eat the right food. As the narrator observes, he "never eats even vegetables, he eats nothing but ginger-nuts" (Melville, 1962, p. 94).

Bartleby for some reason portrayed the characteristics of someone who had previously been hurt by someone or something in the community. He was a hermit, hardly ever leaving the safe surroundings of the chambers. When it was found out that he had actually been living, eating, and working in the chambers, the degree of sympathy for him increased: "What miserable friendlessness and loneliness are here revealed! His poverty is great" (Melville, 1962, p. 99). Although to many, living in the place where you work may seem like an awful place to spend extra time, Bartleby felt safe there, "standing all alone in the quietest of the yards, his face towards a high wall" (Melville 1962 n 115). Then of course we find Bartleby in the end, "strangely huddled at the base of the wall, his knees drawn up" (Melville, 1962, p. 117). He had died quietly in the foetal position, in the safety of his big solid walls.

It was difficult to understand why Bartleby was the way he was until we were told a little about his past. At the very end we find out that, "Bartleby had been a subordinate clerk in Dead Letter office at Washington, from which he had been suddenly removed by a change in administration" (Melville, 1962, p. 119). Bartleby’s boss is given an insight into the reason behind Bartleby being the way he was. His boss says:

> I can not adequately express the emotions which seized me. Dead letters! Does it not sound like dead men? Conceive a man by nature and misfortune prone to pallid hopeless, can any business seem more fitted to heighten it than that of continually handling these dead letter and assorting them to the flames? (Melville, 1962, p. 119).

Because of the nature of his job at the Dead Letter office, he had been driven to the life he lived thereafter. He had been living a hopeless life for that time, dealing with death so frequently, that he himself became in away a walking dead man. His individuality had been taken a way from him, and so he was constrained to be whatever the community wanted him to be. He was no longer a free and innocent person.

Herman Melville’s *Benito Cereno* is a short story that contains some level of constraint on to its American innocent individuals. The Negroes in the story seem to escape the ‘normal’ torment that they would generally have to break through in order to survive. Their struggle does not seem to be as intense. They are given space to move and live more freely.

*Benito Cereno* is about Captain Delano of Duxbury, who is on board his ship in the harbour of St. Maria. Delano becomes uneasy when he is informed of a "strange sail coming into the bay" (Melville, 1962, p. 1). Like the true American seaman that he was, Delano goes to the aid of the ship to help them come in safely, as he feels that they must be in distress because they do not seem to not know what they are doing (Melville, 1962). The American captain sees that the vessel is a “Spanish merchantman of the first class; carrying Negro slaves, amongst other valuable freight, from one colonial port to another” (Melville, 1962, p. 3). He also notices that the ship has “Seguido vuestra jefe” (Melville, 1962, p. 4) (follow your leader) painted or chalked along the side of the ship.

Once Delano had boarded the ship, he met with its Spanish Captain, Benito Cereno and offered "his sympathies, and whatever assistance was in his power" (Melville, 1962, p. 6). The attitude that the American had toward the stranger was similar to the attributes Australians have been stereotyped as possessing: that is to help anyone in need and treat them like your ‘mate’. Americans may not extend their hand as frequently as Australians, but Delano was still showing perhaps the innocence that some Americans do have with regard to helping others. Even though he was out at sea, he still felt compelled to do something in the sea community.

Something that astounded Captain Delano was that the Negroes were being treated quite well on board the Spanish ship the *San Dominick*. Cereno spoke of them in this way: “their owner was quite right in assuring me that no futters would be needed with his blacks” (p. 13). He goes on to say: “those Negroes have always remained upon deck – not thrust below, as in the Guineamen – they have, also, from the beginning, been freely permitted to range within given bounds at their pleasure” (Melville, 1962, p. 13). This scene would most likely never occur on board any other ship, especially one that is native of their country. It is obvious then that the Negroes are not constrained to their community while on board the *San Dominick*. However, if they were simply at home, they would be innocent victims that have high degrees of constraint.

Even more unbelievable for Delano was the fact that Babo, a Negro slave, held a high position on board the Spanish ship. He was the personal assistant of Benito Cereno, doing anything and everything for him. One would have expected a Spanish seaman to take up that position, but the community life on board the *San Dominick* did not follow any of the previously set criteria, so why should things be any different here.

After looking at both *Bartleby the Scrivener* and *Benito Cereno*, it is evident that some individuals in both of the stories do fall victim to their communities that they had to endure. As Donald, Tania states, "Bartleby’s struggle against the constraining effects of his community." NAFF Online 2.1 (2001): 1-2.
communities. This in turn leads to their once innocent lives becoming more complicated due to the struggle for their survival. That is not their life or death survival, but more of them trying to keep their individuality alive, instead of being pushed to the communal way of living. This of course is not an easy feat to master for the individual.

We see Bartleby lives a life that is very unique. For example, living in the place that you work, while also preferring not to do anything that is asked of you would not normally be seen anywhere else. Bartleby’s background at the Dead Letter office, however, may give reason as to why he is the way he is. The community may not have been the initial reason to why Bartleby acts the way he did, but perhaps after treating him as if he were a criminal and sending him to prison, may be Bartleby’s way of giving in to struggling against the constraints put on him.

In Benito Cereno it seems that the Negroes are no longer struggling against the constraints placed on them by their communities, because they are finally being treated like human individuals. They are free on the ship and even take over the Spanish ship showing just how little they are constrained. Delano could perhaps be viewed as spectator that is just watching in slow motion what is happening on board the San Dominick. He does not really know what to say about what he is observing. So his innocence is tested because of this new community that is present on the Spaniard’s ship.

From the two short stories, we are able to observe the way some individuals struggle against the constraining effect that their communities have over them. Other individuals seem to not be constrained because they are not in their normal communities. It is perhaps clearer to us now after reading the stories that to prefer not to follow your leader may in fact be a good idea.

REFERENCE