

herman melville bartleby the scrivener

Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" is a profound and enduring work of American literature, offering a chilling glimpse into the soul of a man whose passive resistance to the drudgery of office life culminates in a profound existential crisis. This novella, set against the backdrop of 19th-century New York City's burgeoning financial district, explores themes of alienation, conformity, and the human capacity for both empathy and indifference. Through the enigmatic figure of Bartleby, Melville masterfully crafts a narrative that continues to resonate with readers, prompting contemplation on individual will versus societal expectation. Understanding the nuances of Bartleby the scrivener, his peculiar refusal to work, and the broader implications of his actions is crucial to appreciating Melville's genius.

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Understanding Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street"

"Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" stands as one of Herman Melville's most enigmatic and thought-provoking short stories. Published in 1853, this novella delves into the dark underbelly of 19th-century capitalism and the profound psychological impact of modern work on the individual. The tale centers on a nameless narrator, a lawyer on Wall Street, who hires a new scrivener named Bartleby. What begins as a routine professional relationship quickly devolves into a study of inexplicable human behavior and the limits of social obligation. This article will explore the setting, characters, central conflict, and enduring themes of this seminal work by Herman Melville, focusing on the character of Bartleby the scrivener.

The Setting: Wall Street and the 19th-Century Office Environment

The narrative of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is deeply rooted in its specific historical and geographical setting: Wall Street in mid-19th century New York City. This era was characterized by rapid industrialization, economic growth, and the burgeoning professional class. Wall Street, as the epicenter of finance, represented the heart of this new, increasingly impersonal economic system. The office where the story unfolds is depicted as a typical, rather dreary, space, filled with the monotonous sounds of scratching quills and the palpable sense of routine. This environment is crucial to understanding Bartleby's actions, as it embodies the very pressures of conformity and the dehumanizing nature of repetitive, unfulfilling labor that many experienced during this period.

Herman Melville expertly uses the description of the office to create an atmosphere of stifling order and quiet desperation. The dim light, the cramped quarters, and the constant presence of other scriveners, each absorbed in their own tasks, contribute to a sense of claustrophobia. This is the world Bartleby enters, and it is within this world that his peculiar resistance begins to manifest. The contrast between the bustling, money-driven world outside and the contained, monotonous existence within the office walls highlights the thematic concerns Melville explores regarding work and meaning.

Introducing Bartleby: The Enigmatic Scrivener

Bartleby is introduced as a man of quiet demeanor and remarkable, if unusual, diligence, at least initially. He arrives at the narrator's office seeking employment as a scrivener, a legal copyist. His appearance is unremarkable, his manner polite but reserved. The narrator, a lawyer accustomed to the efficient and compliant nature of his employees, is initially taken by Bartleby's meticulousness and his ability to work through the night when needed. However, it is not long before Bartleby's behavior takes a decidedly unconventional turn, setting him apart from his colleagues and establishing him as the central enigma of the story.

The early interactions with Bartleby reveal a scrivener who is exceptionally skilled at his job, producing beautifully copied legal documents. Yet, there is an underlying stillness and detachment about him that hints at something deeper. The narrator finds himself intrigued by this new employee, observing him closely as he works in a small, adjoining office. This initial observation period is key to understanding the narrator's gradual, and ultimately tragic, engagement with Bartleby's inexplicable choices.

Bartleby's Famous Refusal: "I would prefer not to."

The pivotal moment in "Bartleby, the Scrivener" occurs when Bartleby utters his now-famous phrase: "I would prefer not to." This simple, polite refusal marks the beginning of his passive resistance to the demands of his employer and the conventions of the office. The first instance of this refusal comes when the narrator asks Bartleby to proofread some documents. Bartleby, who has been diligently copying, declines the task, stating his preference not to. This statement, delivered without anger or defiance, is deeply unsettling to the narrator, who is accustomed to outright disobedience or reasoned objection.

This initial "I would prefer not to" escalates. Bartleby begins to refuse any task that deviates from his initial role as a copier. He refuses to check mail, refuses to step outside for errands, and eventually refuses to leave the office altogether. Each refusal is met with the same, unnervingly calm, "I would prefer not to." This consistent, passive non-compliance is what drives the narrative and forces the narrator, and by extension the reader, to confront the limits of his own understanding and his moral obligations to another human being. The repetition of this phrase underscores Bartleby's unwavering, albeit passive, rebellion.

The Narrator's Reactions and Evolving Perspective

The narrator's response to Bartleby's escalating refusals forms the core of the story's dramatic tension. Initially, the narrator is baffled and somewhat annoyed. He tries to reason with Bartleby, to understand the motive behind his peculiar behavior. As Bartleby's refusals become more frequent and more encompassing, the narrator's reaction shifts from annoyance to a mixture of confusion, pity, and ultimately, a grudging empathy. He attempts various strategies to manage Bartleby, from gentle persuasion to outright demands, but Bartleby remains steadfast in his passive resistance.

The narrator's internal struggle is central to the novella's exploration of human nature. He grapples with the ethical implications of Bartleby's situation. Should he simply dismiss him? Is he responsible for Bartleby's well-being? The narrator represents a segment of society that, while not inherently cruel, is ill-equipped to deal with radical non-conformity. His attempts to understand Bartleby, to integrate him back into the system, and to rationalize his existence reveal the limitations of conventional social and professional frameworks when confronted with an individual who simply refuses to participate. His evolving perspective reflects a growing awareness of the profound alienation that can exist even in the midst of societal interaction.

Analyzing Bartleby's Passive Resistance: Motivations and Meanings

The central mystery of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" lies in understanding the motivations behind Bartleby's steadfast refusal to act. Melville provides few direct clues, leaving the interpretation open to the reader. Is Bartleby a victim of the dehumanizing work environment? Is he protesting the soul-crushing nature of Wall Street and its relentless pursuit of profit? Or is his resistance a more profound, existential statement about the futility of human endeavor?

One common interpretation suggests that Bartleby's refusal is a form of protest against the alienating conditions of modern labor. In an age where individuals were increasingly reduced to cogs in a larger machine, Bartleby's quiet withdrawal can be seen as a radical act of self-preservation. He refuses to be a mere tool; he insists on his own will, even if that will is expressed through negation. Another perspective views Bartleby as a Christ-like figure, embodying a passive, suffering innocence in a corrupt world, though this interpretation is debated.

Furthermore, Bartleby's actions could be interpreted as a commentary on the very nature of choice and free will. By choosing not to do what he is told, he asserts his individuality. However, his inability or unwillingness to do anything else renders this assertion hollow, leading to his ultimate demise. The ambiguity of his motivations is precisely what makes Bartleby such a compelling and enduring character, inviting a multitude of scholarly and personal interpretations.

Themes Explored in Bartleby the Scrivener

Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is rich with thematic depth, exploring various facets of the human condition within the context of early American capitalism. The novella delves into profound philosophical and social questions that remain relevant today. The character of Bartleby serves as a catalyst for examining these critical issues.

Alienation and Isolation

One of the most prominent themes is alienation. Bartleby is profoundly alienated from his work, his colleagues, and society at large. His quiet, uncommunicative nature and his eventual confinement to the office space symbolize a deep disconnect from the world. This isolation is mirrored to some extent in the narrator's own feelings of detachment, despite his position of professional success.

Conformity vs. Individuality

The novella starkly contrasts the pressure to conform with the assertion of individuality. Bartleby's refusal to engage in the expected behaviors of an employee, particularly his consistent "I would prefer not to," represents a radical form of individuality. However, this individuality, untethered from any discernible purpose or connection, ultimately leads to his destruction. The narrator, while initially trying to enforce conformity, is forced to confront the ethical implications of suppressing or

misunderstanding individual will.

The Nature of Work and Purpose

"Bartleby, the Scrivener" also critically examines the nature of work in the modern era. The monotonous, uncreative tasks of a scrivener, especially within the context of Wall Street's commercialism, are presented as potentially soul-destroying. Bartleby's passive resistance can be seen as a response to the perceived meaninglessness of his labor, questioning what it truly means to work and find purpose.

Humanity, Empathy, and Indifference

The story is a powerful exploration of empathy and indifference. The narrator's evolving response to Bartleby, from initial exasperation to a reluctant sense of responsibility, highlights the human capacity for compassion. However, the reactions of other characters, such as the subsequent tenants of the office, reveal a stark indifference to Bartleby's plight. The novella questions how society treats those who deviate from the norm and who cannot or will not participate in the prescribed social contract.

The Absurdity of Modern Life

Finally, "Bartleby, the Scrivener" can be read as a commentary on the absurdity of modern life. The relentless pursuit of wealth, the bureaucratic structures, and the increasingly impersonal nature of interactions all contribute to a sense of the absurd. Bartleby's irrational behavior, in this light, becomes a reflection of the irrationality he perceives in the world around him.

Literary Devices and Narrative Style in Herman Melville's Work

Herman Melville employs a distinctive narrative style in "Bartleby, the Scrivener," characterized by irony, subtle foreshadowing, and a deeply subjective point of view. The story is told from the first-person perspective of the narrator, a lawyer on Wall Street. This narrative choice is crucial, as it filters Bartleby's actions through the lens of a character who is, at once, an observer, an employer, and a potential benefactor. The narrator's voice is often characterized by a certain urbanity and a desire to maintain order and rationality, which makes his inability to comprehend or control Bartleby all the more impactful.

Melville's use of irony is pervasive. The narrator, who prides himself on his fairness and good judgment, finds himself increasingly bewildered and ultimately overwhelmed by Bartleby's quiet defiance. The story also utilizes symbolism, with the confined office space and Bartleby's preference for staying indoors suggesting his internal world and his detachment from the external realities of the bustling city. The contrast between the narrator's orderly life and Bartleby's enigmatic existence creates a powerful tension that drives the narrative forward. The descriptive language, though often

understated, vividly paints a picture of the drab, oppressive environment of 19th-century Wall Street, setting the stage for Bartleby's dramatic refusal.

The Enduring Legacy and Interpretations of Bartleby

The legacy of "Bartleby, the Scrivener" is undeniable, cementing its place as a masterpiece of American literature. The character of Bartleby has become an archetype, a symbol of passive resistance and existential despair. Over the decades, literary critics and readers alike have offered a myriad of interpretations, each seeking to unlock the profound mystery of the scrivener's motivations and his ultimate fate.

Some scholars view Bartleby as a proto-existentialist figure, embodying the anxieties and alienation of modernity. Others have interpreted him through psychoanalytic lenses, seeing his refusal as a symptom of deep psychological trauma. Still others have explored the novella as a social critique, arguing that Bartleby's actions are a direct response to the dehumanizing effects of capitalist labor practices. The story's enduring power lies in its refusal to provide easy answers, compelling each generation to re-examine its themes through their own contemporary perspectives. The very ambiguity of Bartleby the scrivener ensures his continued relevance in discussions about work, society, and the individual's place within them.

Conclusion: The Timeless Significance of Bartleby, the Scrivener

In conclusion, Herman Melville's "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street" remains a compelling and deeply resonant work of literature. Through the unforgettable character of Bartleby the scrivener, Melville masterfully explores profound themes of alienation, conformity, and the human struggle for meaning in a rapidly industrializing world. The novella's enigmatic protagonist, whose simple phrase "I would prefer not to" becomes a radical act of passive resistance, continues to provoke questions about individual will versus societal expectations and the ethical responsibilities we have towards one another. The story's vivid depiction of the 19th-century Wall Street environment serves as a powerful backdrop for these explorations. The enduring legacy of Bartleby lies in its ability to transcend its historical context, offering timeless insights into the human condition that continue to challenge and engage readers today, making Bartleby the scrivener an indispensable figure in literary analysis.

Frequently Asked Questions

What makes Bartleby's refusal 'I would prefer not to' so impactful and endlessly analyzed?

Bartleby's iconic phrase is impactful because it's a quiet, yet absolute, act of passive resistance against the dehumanizing nature of his work and the expectations of his employer. It's analyzed for

its ambiguity – is it a statement of mental breakdown, philosophical defiance, or a critique of alienation under capitalism? This lack of a clear reason allows for diverse interpretations, making it a timeless and resonant symbol of individual will against overwhelming systems.

How does Melville use setting to emphasize Bartleby's isolation and the oppressive environment of the law office?

Melville uses the Wall Street law office setting to represent a sterile, impersonal, and morally bankrupt environment. The 'dim, dusty printings,' the 'dead walls,' and the constant drone of activity outside create a sense of confinement and lack of vitality. This contrasts sharply with the vibrant (though often corrupt) life outside, highlighting Bartleby's complete detachment from societal norms and human connection. His confinement to his desk mirrors his internal withdrawal.

What is the significance of the narrator's changing perception of Bartleby throughout the story?

The narrator's perception evolves from initial annoyance and bewilderment to a complex mix of pity, fascination, and even a grudging admiration. He tries to rationalize Bartleby's behavior, then attempts to impose his own logic and morality. Ultimately, the narrator's inability to comprehend or change Bartleby leads to his own moral reckoning, forcing him to confront his own complicity and the limitations of human empathy and understanding.

Beyond a simple character study, what broader societal or philosophical themes does 'Bartleby, the Scrivener' explore?

The story delves into themes of alienation, the dehumanizing effects of modern labor, the nature of free will versus determinism, the limitations of conventional morality and charity, and the inherent absurdity of existence. Bartleby can be seen as a manifestation of existential angst, a critique of capitalist exploitation, or even a Christ-like figure who refuses to engage with a fallen world.

How does the story's ending, with Bartleby's death, resolve or further complicate the narrative's mysteries?

Bartleby's death, while seemingly a tragic end, doesn't offer easy resolutions. It further solidifies his enigmatic nature, leaving the reader to ponder the 'why.' His passive death can be interpreted as the ultimate act of refusal, or simply the inevitable consequence of his complete withdrawal. The narrator's final observation, 'Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!' suggests a broader, shared human condition of despair and the struggle for meaning, leaving the reader with lingering questions rather than definitive answers.

Additional Resources

Here are 9 book titles related to Bartleby, the Scrivener, with descriptions:

1. *The Stranger*: Albert Camus' existential classic explores themes of alienation and indifference through the story of Meursault, a man detached from societal norms and emotions. Like Bartleby, Meursault's passive refusal to conform leads to his ostracization and eventual confrontation with the

absurdity of life. The novel's exploration of meaninglessness and the individual's resistance to imposed values resonates with Bartleby's enigmatic stance.

2. *The Trial*: Franz Kafka's seminal work plunges protagonist Josef K. into a bewildering and inescapable legal system, highlighting the oppressive nature of bureaucracy and the search for justification. Josef K.'s passive acceptance and eventual inability to understand the charges against him mirror Bartleby's inscrutable resistance to explanation. The pervasive sense of futility and the crushing weight of an incomprehensible authority are shared concerns.

3. *Notes from Underground*: Fyodor Dostoevsky's novella features an unnamed narrator who rails against rationalism and societal progress, advocating for individual free will even when it leads to self-destruction. The underground man's spiteful rebellion and his eloquent articulation of perverse desires find a kinship with Bartleby's quiet, yet profound, defiance of expectations. Both characters embody a fundamental opposition to the prevailing order.

4. *The Castle*: Another of Kafka's masterpieces, this novel follows land surveyor K. as he attempts to gain access to a mysterious castle that governs his village. His persistent yet fruitless efforts to understand and penetrate the bureaucratic labyrinth echo Bartleby's immovable presence within his office. The novel critiques the alienation caused by impenetrable systems and the individual's struggle for meaning within them.

5. *The Plague*: Albert Camus presents a narrative of citizens in the Algerian city of Oran forced to confront a devastating epidemic, exploring human response to suffering and the search for solidarity. While overtly about collective struggle, the novel also touches on individual stances of rebellion and acceptance in the face of overwhelming circumstances. The underlying themes of existential responsibility and finding purpose amidst absurdity are relevant.

6. *The Man Without Qualities*: Robert Musil's monumental, unfinished novel examines the intellectual and social landscape of Austria-Hungary on the eve of World War I. It delves into questions of identity, possibility, and the inertia that can grip individuals and societies. The novel's exploration of the unlived life and the potential for "what-if" scenarios can be seen as a grander, more societal reflection of Bartleby's own arrested development.

7. *Invisible Man*: Ralph Ellison's powerful novel depicts an African American man's struggle for identity and belonging in a racist society, becoming invisible due to the prejudice of others. The protagonist's journey of self-discovery through alienation and his eventual realization of his own agency, however painful, offers a counterpoint and comparison to Bartleby's static refusal. Both characters grapple with being unseen and unheard in different ways.

8. *Waiting for Godot*: Samuel Beckett's iconic play features two tramps, Vladimir and Estragon, who endlessly await the arrival of someone named Godot, who never appears. Their futile wait and repetitive dialogue, filled with existential angst and a desperate search for meaning, parallel Bartleby's own passive existence and his refusal to engage in purposeful activity. The play masterfully captures the absurdity of inaction.

9. *The Voynich Manuscript*: While not a fictional narrative, this ancient, undeciphered book, filled with strange script and bizarre illustrations, embodies an enigma akin to Bartleby's character. Its incomprehensibility and the ongoing human effort to understand it reflect the profound mystery surrounding Bartleby's motivations and his ultimate fate. The book's enduring puzzle invites speculation and a desire to penetrate the unknown, much like Bartleby himself.

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