

# Bartleby the Scrivener

Author  
**Herman Melville**

Year Published  
**1853**

Original Language  
**English**

## MAIN CHARACTERS

### Occupying Wall Street

A Wall Street lawyer hires a new clerk, but after just three days Bartleby begins to politely decline requests. Soon he is doing no work at all but also refuses to leave the office. This enigmatic story of Bartleby, his boss, and his coworkers can be read as a critique of Wall Street and the workplace that—rather than fading away like its protagonist—is reflected in modern-day depictions of office characters and life.

#### Turkey

**The Office Drunk**  
Old clerk; drinks at lunch and shirks his afternoon duties

#### Nippers

**The Entitled Millennial**  
Young clerk; ambitious and self-important

#### Lawyer

**The Bumbling Boss**  
Well-intentioned but narcissistic owner of the law practice

#### Ginger Nut

**The Intern**  
Errand boy and carman's son; hoping to do better in life

#### Bartleby

**The Loner**  
Eccentric employee; stops working and occupies the office indefinitely

## Author

## Symbols



**HERMAN MELVILLE**  
1819–91

The author of the epic novel *Moby-Dick*, Melville is regarded as one of the greatest American writers. He wrote "Bartleby the Scrivener" amid a storm of criticism from the literary world, and its themes of capitalism, absurdity, and protest have long intrigued readers.



### Dead Letters

Symbolize mortality and hopelessness



### Walls

Embody the isolation Bartleby faces in his office and, eventually, prison



*would prefer not to.*

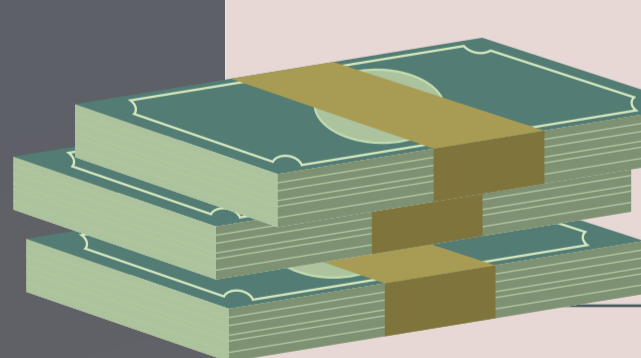
Bartleby, throughout the story

## Bartleby the Scrivener by the Numbers



14

Times Bartleby says, "I would prefer not to"



\$85

Amount Melville was paid by *Putnam's Magazine*, which published "Bartleby" anonymously in two installments



5

Months before his death that Melville finished his final novel, *Billy Budd*

## Themes

### Responsibility

The lawyer debates his responsibility toward Bartleby when he is no longer useful.

### Isolation

Bartleby slowly cuts himself off from everything, eventually even food.

### Passivity

Bartleby quietly refuses to comply with requests, and his boss responds passively.