

# Bartleby the Scrivener

## Plot Summary

An elderly Wall Street lawyer, the story's narrator, takes into his employ a scrivener, or copyist. The lawyer proclaims himself to be an unambitious and a cautious man, one for whom "the easiest way of life is best." Yet Bartleby, his sedate and unassuming employee, refuses to comply with the lawyer's requests for assistance. All he will do is copy documents; to any other tasks he responds quietly, "I prefer not to." Thus Bartleby becomes a persistent source of annoyance and later of deep disturbance to his employer. A quiet contest of the wills ensues. The narrator cannot get the scrivener to do his bidding, and it is Bartleby who then dictates the precise terms of his employment—a reversal of the traditional relationship between employer and employee.

Eventually, the lawyer learns that Bartleby is even living in his office and it is at this point that he offers an ultimatum, one that is ignored precisely as all his previous demands were. In order to rid himself of Bartleby, the lawyer moves his office to another address, but Bartleby remains to haunt the building until he is jailed by the building's owner. When the regretful lawyer visits him in jail, he finds a silent, shrunken man who will not eat. Guiltily, the lawyer pays a guard to make sure Bartleby is given food, but Bartleby says, "I prefer not to," and shortly thereafter, dies.

The comic nature of the story reverses itself in the conclusion when the conflict between the lawyer and his copyist ends in the latter's death. The final revelation of Bartleby's past as clerk in the Dead Letter Office in Washington causes the narrator to ponder his employee's sad life, a life of "pallid hopelessness;" "'Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!'"

## Vocabulary

(Suggestion: Provide students with vocabulary definitions beforehand to increase reading comprehension and enjoyment.)

Page	Word	Definition
115	arduous	involving great hardship or exertion
	remunerative	paid for work or services
	abrogation	annulment
	fervid	with great warmth
117	maledictions	curse
	dun	to make repeated demands for repayment of a debt
118	gesticulating	making gestures
	execrable	utterly detestable
	obstreperousness	resisting control in a noisy difficult manner
	pecunious	having money
	insolent	disrespectful
119	temperate	moderate
120	recondite	beyond ordinary knowledge, obscure
128	dishabille	carelessly or partly dressed
	secular	concerned with worldly or nonreligious things
129	chimeras	vain or idle thoughts
132	aberration	deviation from what is right
	efficacy	reliability
135	sagacious	wise

## Questions for Discussion/Comprehension

1. How does the narrator describe himself? What is his philosophy of life? How do others describe the narrator?
2. Who are Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut? What are their distinguishing characteristics? How do Turkey and Nippers change in appearance and attitude after lunch?
3. What characteristics does Bartleby possess that make the narrator decide to hire him? What reaction does Bartleby present that surprises the lawyer?
4. What is the lawyer's response to Bartleby's refusal? To his continued refusals? What aspects of the narrator's personality make this response understandable? In what ways is his response ridiculous?
5. What additional peculiarities does Bartleby exhibit? How does the narrator respond to them?
6. How does Bartleby's behavior affect Turkey and Nippers?
7. What happens when the narrator gives Bartleby a six day ultimatum?
8. What does the narrator conclude about the "source" of his troubles? What do you, the reader, conclude?
9. What finally makes the narrator resolve to get rid of Bartleby? How does he do it?
10. Under what circumstances does Bartleby at last leave the office? What happens to him as a result of this? What is the rumor about Bartleby's past that the narrator relates?

## Literature Analysis

1. The clash between the narrator and Bartleby is basically a comic one. Discuss the eccentricities of these characters and show how the central conflict of the story develops out of their peculiarities. Discuss also the ending of the story and how it contrasts with the overall comic tone established earlier.
2. Some critics have identified in Bartleby the theme of the artist who refuses to write the kind of work society demands him to write. Discuss the story in terms of its symbolic relation to the writer's inability to comply with society's demands.