



Bartleby the Scrivener

Study Guide by Course Hero



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👁 Book Basics

AUTHOR

Herman Melville

YEAR PUBLISHED

1853

GENRE

Fiction

PERSPECTIVE AND NARRATOR

Bartleby, the Scrivener is narrated by the title character's employer, whose first-person point of view allows the reader to appreciate the lawyer's perspective of his listless employee.

TENSE

Bartleby, the Scrivener is told primarily in past tense.

ABOUT THE TITLE

Bartleby, the Scrivener refers to the title character, a scrivener or clerk who copies legal documents by hand at a Wall Street law firm. The subtitle, *A Story of Wall-Street*, references the literal and figurative walls that surround him.

🕒 In Context

Worker Struggles

The narrator of *Bartleby, the Scrivener* is looking back on the time Bartleby came to work for him. He refers to "the late John Jacob Astor," the immensely wealthy man who owned a great deal of New York City real estate during that time. Astor died in 1848, so the setting for the story is sometime in the 1840s prior to that date. The decade was a time of great unrest among workers around the world, as the Industrial Revolution brought about drastic changes in working conditions. German philosophers Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels published *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848, which called on workers to revolt. In the United States, factory worker revolts protested against the long hours they worked for low pay. Strikes also occurred by workers in bookbinding, upholstery, shoemaking, and tailoring shops.

Voiceless and powerless white-collar workers like the ones depicted in *Bartleby, the Scrivener* did not stage organized rebellions. They could, however, make personal revolts like the one made by Bartleby.

Social Unrest

Herman Melville was familiar with the social unrest of the day, and *Bartleby* mentions the narrator's fears of a mob. A mob action with which Herman Melville was very familiar was the Astor Place Riot of May 1849. In the riot, which occurred in New York City, more than 20 people died and more than 100 were injured. It was set off when a famous British actor, William Charles Macready, appeared at an upscale opera house. Macready and Edwin Forrest, an American actor, were rivals. The actors symbolized different sides of the class divisions in New York. When Macready, who was favored by the upper class, took the stage, the audience threw everything at him—from rotten eggs to vegetables.

Herman Melville was one of the signers of an open letter to Macready, published in the *New York Herald Tribune*, urging him to continue his performances despite the unrest. But when Macready did return to the stage, a crowd attempted to charge the opera house, and police attacked them. Ultimately, the militia came. When the crowd was on the verge of overrunning the militia, they were fired upon. The next day was tense as crowds gathered again. Police stopped the would-be rioters, and calm was eventually restored.

Herman Melville did not explain why he signed the letter to Macready. The English professor and critic Barbara Foley has speculated that *Bartleby* was his apology for doing so. "Melville knows his narrator so well," Foley says, "because he carries aspects of the lawyer within himself."

American Romanticism

Herman Melville was part of the American Romantic movement. These writers, who also included Walt Whitman and Herman Melville's friends Ralph Waldo Emerson, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Henry David Thoreau, took as their ideals a celebration of the individual, a strong connection with nature, and the power of imagination and intuition.

John Jacob Astor

The narrator of *Bartleby, the Scrivener* notes that John Jacob Astor had been one of his clients. When Astor died in New York City in 1848, some say he was the most hated man in the

city. He also was the wealthiest man in the country and was characterized by his ambition and love of money. Astor, a German immigrant by way of London, got his start in the fur business. Later he bought vast holdings of New York City real estate, which led to his great fortune. When the War of 1812 ended, Astor and some of his associates rescued the federal government from bankruptcy. While many respected him for his business acumen, many thought of Astor as ruthless and selfish.

Literary and Historical Allusions

The story includes a number of literary and historical references:

- **Bust of Cicero:** Statue of the head and shoulders of the Roman philosopher, lawyer, and orator Cicero (born in 106 BCE), who was murdered for his political activities at the age of 63 in 43 BCE.
- **Colt and Adams:** An 1841 Broadway murder in which a man named John Colt murdered the owner of a print shop, Samuel Adams, with a hatchet.
- **Edwards on the Will and Priestly on Necessity:** Respective works by theologians about free will versus predestination. *The Freedom of the Will* by Jonathan Edwards was written in 1754, and Joseph Priestley's *The Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* was published in 1777. (Note the contemporary spelling of Priestley's name.)
- **Job:** In the Hebrew Bible's Book of Job, the figure Job is a righteous man who is tested by God. He suffers terribly and loses everything, including his family, health, and wealth. Ultimately, Job comes to regret ever being born, although he never curses God. Job's words quoted by the narrator in *Bartleby, the Scrivener*—"with kings and counselors"—are part of his lament that if he had died at birth, he would at least be resting peacefully, as even the most powerful men do.
- **Master in Chancery:** The Courts of Chancery (also called Courts of Equity) had been abolished by the time *Bartleby* was written. They heard legal cases that could not be settled through common law, including cases dealing with transfers of property and foreclosures. The Master in Chancery was an officer of the court in various ways.
- **Scriveners:** Scriveners made their living by writing or copying legal documents.
- **Sons of Adam:** In the Hebrew Bible, Adam's first two

children are his sons Cain, a farmer, and Abel, a shepherd. When both give offerings to God, God favors Abel's offering, causing Cain to be jealous. He kills his brother, becoming the first murderer.

- **The Tombs:** This is the nickname for a lower Manhattan jail built in 1838. Its official name was the New York Halls of Justice and House of Detention.
- **Wall Street:** Located in the southern tip of Manhattan, Wall Street is a street in New York City's financial district and the center of American finance. The New York Stock Exchange, the world's largest market for buying and selling stocks (shares representing ownership of a company), has been located there since its founding. The institution took the name New York Stock & Exchange Board in 1817.

Author Biography

Herman Melville, the third of eight children, was born in New York City on August 1, 1819. His father, Allan Melvill, operated a business in European finery, but it fared very poorly. In 1830, Allan fled New York City with his family to Albany, deeply in debt and seeking loans and aid from Melville's grandfather. Allan Melvill died two years later in 1832, which also meant the end of Herman Melville's formal education, as his mother could not afford to keep him in school. Upon his father's death, his mother altered the spelling of the family's last name.

At age 13 Melville went to work as an errand boy at an Albany bank, and then for his older brother's cap and fur business, but this business failed as well. He also worked briefly as a teacher and studied to become a surveyor for the Erie Canal, which was then being constructed. In the late 1830s, he began writing and submitting letters and short fiction to local newspapers.

In 1839, with his prospects in Albany dim, Melville found a job as a cabin boy on a merchant ship traveling from New York City to Liverpool (this experience would later form the basis for his novel *Redburn*). Afterward, he returned to a teaching position near Albany, but by 1841 he had signed onto service aboard a whaling ship, not returning to America until 1844. His adventures, which included jumping ship and being captured by cannibals, were the basis of a number of his works, including his first novel, published in 1846, *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life*. This first novel would be Melville's greatest financial success. In 1847, Melville married the New York native Elizabeth Shaw, and the couple eventually had four children.

Melville's second novel, *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas*, was published in 1847 as a sequel to the 1846 novel *Typee* and was well received. His third novel, *Mardi, and a Voyage Thither*, took a much more philosophical turn than his previous work. Published in 1849, it was widely rejected by critics. Subsequently, Melville returned to the seafaring tales that had won some critical acclaim.

In 1851 he published his sixth novel and signature classic *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*, but it was a critical and commercial failure. He turned instead to publishing serializations and short fiction in *Harper's* and *Putnam's* monthly magazines, and it was during this period in 1853 that he published "Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street" in two installments in *Putnam's*. The story of an alienated office worker who refuses to work might have represented Melville's difficulty in maintaining success as a writer. The story was later collected in *The Piazza Tales* (1856). He published his last novel, *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade*, in 1857.

In 1866, unable to support his family by writing, Melville took a position as an inspector with the U.S. Customs Service, working on the docks in New York City, a position he would hold for nearly 20 years. During this time he focused on writing poetry, though at the time of his death on September 28, 1891, he left behind the short novel *Billy Budd, Sailor*, still in manuscript form. His writing had fallen largely into obscurity, but later reprints of his works brought much acclaim and secured his reputation as one of the greatest American novelists.

Characters

The narrator

The narrator is a proud man close to age 60 who values work and the connections he has been able to make. His small staff functions well together despite their quirks. He makes no mention of family or friends and seems content to make a prospering business the focus of his life.

Bartleby

Bartleby joins the staff of the narrator as a scrivener. After a couple of days on the job, he begins to refuse certain tasks his boss asks of him. Eventually, he does nothing but reside in the narrator's office. He is calm and silent, as well as noncompliant.

Turkey

Turkey is around the same age as his boss, the narrator, and considers himself to be the right-hand man. He works effectively and efficiently in the mornings. However, he comes back drunk from his long lunches. In the afternoons his work is poor, and he is harsh. The narrator offers him the option to work only in the mornings, but he declines and insists he is needed and capable.

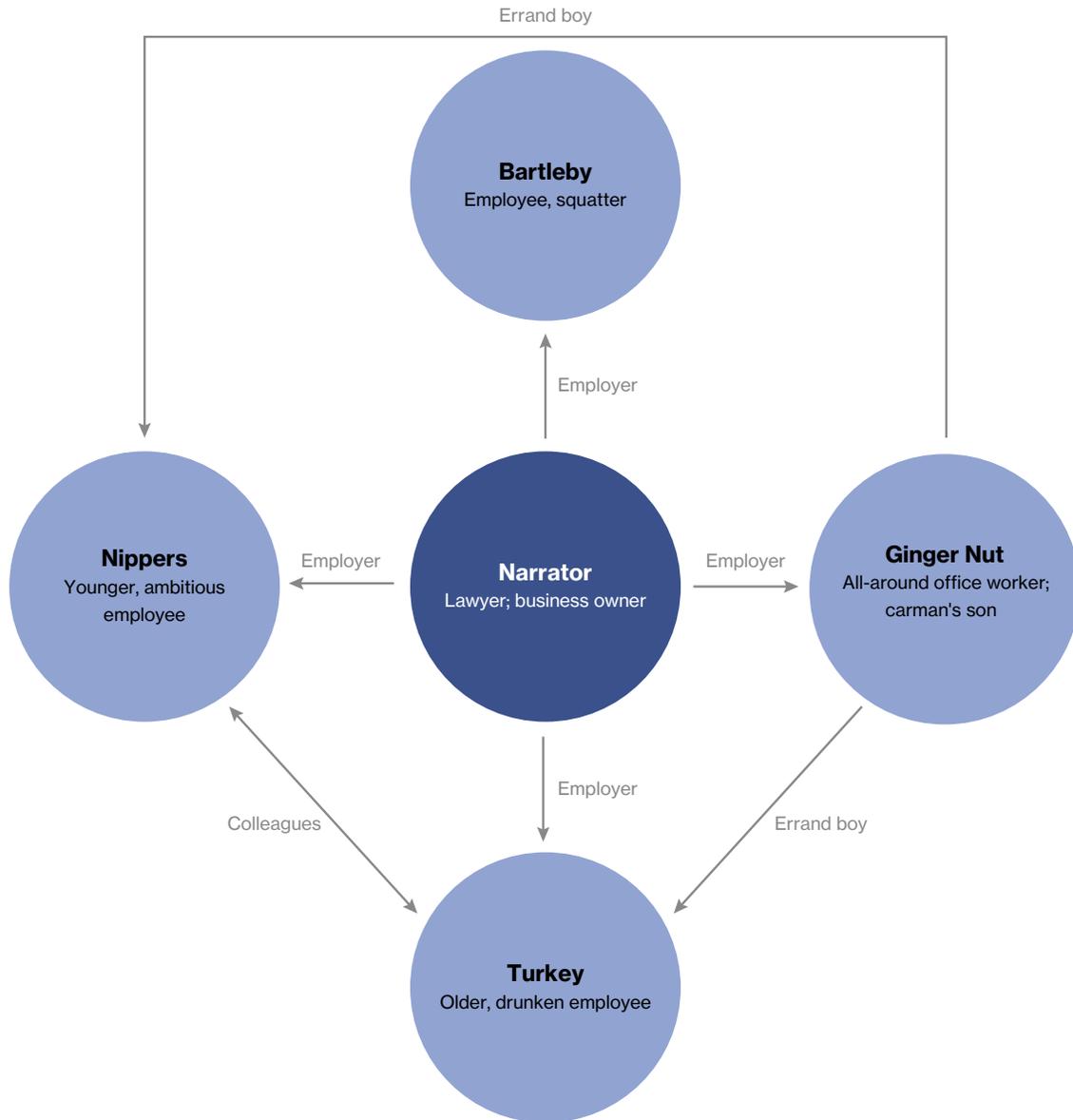
Nippers

Nippers is an ambitious young man who suffers from indigestion, which makes him irritable in the mornings. It typically dissipates by the afternoon when he becomes more effective and pleasant. He has clients of his own and is active politically.

Ginger Nut

Ginger Nut is 12 years old. His father, who got him the job, has big dreams and hopes his son will learn about the law and one day become a judge. Ginger Nut is compliant and runs errands for the others in the office.

Character Map



- Main Character
- Other Major Character
- Minor Character

Full Character List

Character	Description
The narrator	The narrator is a well-to-do lawyer who works on Wall Street.
Bartleby	Bartleby is employed as a scrivener for the narrator.
Turkey	Turkey is employed as a scrivener for the narrator.
Nippers	Nippers is employed as a scrivener for the narrator.
Ginger Nut	Ginger Nut is employed as an office boy for the narrator.
The grub-man	The grub-man is the cook at the prison where Bartleby is taken.
The landlord	The landlord owns the building where the narrator has an office. He tries to get the lawyer to take responsibility for Bartleby, and eventually has Bartleby arrested.
Mr. B.	Mr. B. moves into the office that the narrator has vacated.
Nippers's clients	Nippers's clients are seedy-looking men who show up at the narrator's office to see him.
The tenants	The tenants share the office building the narrator was in before he left for a new building.

Plot Summary

Bartleby, the Scrivener begins with the title character's boss introducing himself. The narrator is an older gentleman and a successful Wall Street lawyer. He notes that over the course of his career, he has worked "with what would seem an interesting and somewhat singular set of men ... law-copyists or scriveners." While the narrator compliments these

gentleman whose job is to copy and proofread legal documents, there is one whom he wants to focus on—Bartleby, "the strangest I ever saw or heard of." The narrator has scant knowledge of Bartleby's life.

The narrator reveals more about himself, his employees, and his business. He lives his life based on his theory that "the easiest way of life is the best." The narrator adds he is a lawyer, not especially ambitious, who is considered safe, and rarely loses his temper. He is a lawyer "who never addresses a jury, or in any way draws down public applause." Instead he works at making copies of legal documents, describing his work "in the cool tranquility of a snug retreat" among "rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds." He prides himself for having worked for the extremely rich John Jacob Astor. Business has been good recently.

He has a second-floor office on Wall Street. One view is of a blackened brick wall, while the other is of a "white wall of the interior of a spacious sky-light shaft," though it does not provide any sign of "what landscape painters call 'life.'" The narrator employs three people—two copyists and an errand boy. They all have nicknames "deemed expressive of their respective persons or characters."

The most senior employee, Turkey, is around the same age as the narrator, near 60, and has worked with him for many years. The narrator is happy with Turkey's work in the morning. However, after he takes his lunch break, he returns to the office with a red face due to consuming alcohol. While he remains energetic, Turkey is less productive, makes mistakes, and is easily provoked to anger. The narrator suggests he work a half day, but Turkey insists on working a full day. "I consider myself your right-hand man," he says.

Nippers is around 25, and the narrator says, "I always deemed him the victim of two evil powers—ambition and indigestion." He can be testy and irritable when suffering from indigestion, which typically occurs in the morning. This is the time of day when Nippers makes mistakes and constantly rearranges his work space, trying to get it to his liking. He also receives visitors at the office whom he calls his clients. Ultimately, the narrator says Nippers is useful and dressed nicely, which "reflected credit upon my chambers." Nippers's relative calm and industriousness in the afternoons balances out Turkey's relative usefulness in the mornings, so the narrator is content to employ them both.

Ginger Nut is 12 years old, and his father, who is a car man,

wants his son to be a student of the law. The narrator notes Ginger Nut acts as a cleaner, sweeper, and errand boy who is paid \$1 a week. One of his main tasks is to go out and buy food (often ginger nut cakes) and drink for Turkey and Nippers.

The narrator returns to the story of Bartleby, whom he hires because of an increase in business: he has recently been given the office of Master in Chancery. Bartleby appears at his office, described as a "motionless young man" who is "pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, [and] incurably forlorn!" He is hired after a brief interview and given a work space on the narrator's side of the office, next to a window that faces a brick wall that provides "no view at all." The narrator thinks Bartleby will fit in well because he is "so singularly sedate," which might offset the "the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers." Bartleby is thus isolated but within earshot of the narrator.

At first Bartleby does an excellent job, though his silence concerns the narrator. On the third day of his employment, Bartleby is called into the narrator's office to proofread his coworker's copy. Upon being called a second time, Bartleby replies "in a singularly mild, firm voice, 'I would prefer not to.'" The response stuns the narrator. After gathering himself, the request is made again, and Bartleby replies with the same words. The narrator is unsure what to do next. As he is in a rush, he leaves the situation and gets another employee to help him.

A few days later the entire staff is gathered to do the same task. When Bartleby is asked to join he again replies, "I would prefer not to." Again the narrator is shocked. He asks for an explanation, but Bartleby simply repeats himself. The narrator tries to explain the necessity of doing one's work, but to no avail. He asks the others what they think, and they are all irritated and support the narrator. Nothing happens, and eventually they continue on with the work without Bartleby because of the fast-paced demands of their office work.

The narrator notices Bartleby does not leave the office and seems to exist on the ginger nut cakes that Ginger Nut buys for him. The narrator begins to feel pity for Bartleby. While he thinks, "Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance," he reasons that if he fires him, Bartleby will end up with a "less indulgent employer" and suffer because of it. He decides that "to humor him ... will cost me nothing, while I lay up in my soul what will eventually prove a sweet morsel for my conscience." In short, Bartleby is useful in providing the narrator with an inexpensive balm for his conscience. He

decides to try to befriend Bartleby, but he gets frustrated and angry with the lack of response.

When Bartleby again refuses to do some work, the narrator questions his employees as to their opinion. The narrator then asks for Bartleby to run an errand and receives the same reply. A little later another request is made of Bartleby, and he says the same phrase yet again. The narrator decides to "walk home for the day, suffering much from perplexity and distress of mind." Time passes and Bartleby does the copying but nothing else.

Arriving too early for church one Sunday morning, the narrator decides to visit his office. As he tries to enter, he "found it resisted by something inserted from the inside." Bartleby is there, having locked the door from the inside. He says that he is not ready to have someone enter and tells the narrator to come back later. The narrator is astonished, but he leaves and says, "It was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were." When he soon returns to the office, he confirms that Bartleby has been living there for some time. He feels pity for Bartleby and sadness about his situation: "The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom."

The narrator recognizes that Bartleby never speaks unless spoken to, never reads, and stares out "upon the dead brick wall." He comes to believe "the scrivener was the victim of innate and incurable disorder." His soul is suffering, and the narrator cannot reach Bartleby's soul. The narrator resolves to learn Bartleby's history. If he will not answer, the narrator decides he will tell him his services are no longer needed, in addition to offering to help in whatever way is needed.

When Bartleby does not engage in the conversation, the narrator becomes annoyed again. However, he does not want to act out. He asks Bartleby to agree to do the work he has refused and to be more agreeable. Bartleby does not comply. The narrator realizes while talking to Nippers that he has been using the word *prefer* as well. Turkey has also been using the word. The next day Bartleby decides he will no longer write. When asked why, he says, "Do you not see the reason for yourself." The narrator concludes it's because of his eyesight. A few days later Bartleby says he has given up copying forever.

The narrator comes to see Bartleby as a weight, a "millstone" upon him. "Yet I was sorry for him," he says. Bartleby "seemed alone, absolutely alone in the universe." Nevertheless, the

narrator says that "necessities connected with my business tyrannized over all other considerations," and he demands that Bartleby leave within the next six days.

Six days later, Bartleby has not left the premises. The narrator is at a loss about what to do. He decides to pay Bartleby his wages, plus \$20 extra, leaves the money on a table, and demands that Bartleby leave his key and be gone by morning. He imagines that by "assuming" Bartleby will be gone in the morning that Bartleby actually will have in reality left, but this is not the case. The narrator is astonished. He refuses to physically remove Bartleby or to make a scene, but he demands, "What earthly right have you to stay here? Do you pay any rent? ... Or is this property yours?" Bartleby continues to refuse to work or leave.

The narrator is at first in "such a state of nervous resentment" that he recollects a case in which a man named Colt, being "dreadfully incensed" by his victim, a man named Adams, committed murder. Then, however, the narrator remembers the words of Jesus in the New Testament: "A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another." Christian kindness, he reasons, demands that he continue to tolerate Bartleby.

Several days pass, and to shore up his decision to leave Bartleby alone the narrator looks into texts about free will. He wonders if his situation has not "been all predestinated from eternity" and beyond "a mere mortal like me to fathom." But after his professional friends start making comments about Bartleby, the narrator asks himself, "What does conscience say I *should* do with this man, or rather ghost. Rid myself of him, I must." He decides that his only choice is to move his offices. He informs Bartleby and also notes he will no longer need his services. Bartleby is silent. Upon leaving the narrator says good-bye and "God some way bless you" to Bartleby. Again he tries to give Bartleby money, but Bartleby does not take it. He leaves with mixed emotions.

Once situated in the new offices, the narrator is told by the new tenant of his old office that he is responsible for Bartleby. He refuses to be held accountable for removing Bartleby and says, "I know nothing about him." When tenants from the old building come to the narrator and tell him about the issues caused by Bartleby's presence, he agrees to try to speak with him.

When the narrator returns to his old offices to see Bartleby, he suggests a few different jobs that he might apply for, but Bartleby rejects each one. Each time, he insists he is not

particular. First, the narrator gets angry and then offers Bartleby a chance to live in his home until they can find a better solution. Bartleby refuses. The narrator leaves quickly. He takes a vacation for a few days to get away from the guilt and stress as well as the concern that he will be hunted down by the landlord and tenants.

Upon returning to the office, the narrator learns Bartleby has been taken to the Tombs, a prison, for vagrancy. The narrator visits Bartleby. After being greeted by the narrator, Bartleby responds, "I know you, and I want nothing to say to you."

The grub-man, or prison cook, approaches the narrator looking for a bribe. If he wants his friend to eat well, the narrator will need to pay him off. The narrator does so, telling the grub-man to give Bartleby the best food and to be polite with him. When the grub-man approaches Bartleby, he replies, "I prefer not to dine to-day."

After a few days the narrator comes back to the Tombs. He is told Bartleby, or the silent man, is "sleeping in the yard there. 'Tis not twenty minutes since I saw him lie down." The narrator goes to Bartleby and sees he has died. To the grub-man's inquiry if Bartleby is asleep, the narrator replies, "With kings and counselors," quoting the biblical Book of Job.

Sometime later, the narrator learns a piece of information about Bartleby. He "had been a subordinate clerk in the Dead Letter Office at Washington," a job he lost because of a "change in the administration." Bartleby had opened letters that were deemed undeliverable by the postal service, removed any valuable contents, and then had the letters burned. The narrator concludes the story, "Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!"

🔍 Plot Analysis

Bartleby, the Scrivener can be read and interpreted in many different ways, an impact that the author surely intended by taking as characters an ambiguous "[being] of whom nothing is ascertainable" and a narrator who tries but fails to understand his subject. Below are insights on four of the major areas of discussion about the short story.

Bartleby's Stance

From the story's title, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street*, readers might assume that Bartleby is the protagonist of the story. His refusal to work can be seen as a heroic form of rebellion against the impersonal capitalism of Wall Street and the deadening work of copying—a passive or nonviolent expression of resistance like those later made famous by Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. Evoking the theme of religion, he can also be seen as a Christ-like figure, sacrificed for his refusal to do meaningless work—although this view of the character has limitations because he does no good aside from disturbing the status quo. From the perspective of Romanticism, he exerts individual power through his refusals, like a hero, and seems to follow intuitions about the hopeless nature of his work that he gained during his tenure in the Dead Letter Office.

Yet in his extreme passivity and isolation, Bartleby is ultimately an antihero and serves as a foil to, or double of, the narrator. The only qualities Bartleby displays are a lack of interest in work and a capacity for keeping still. He barely talks other than his often-repeated phrase, "I prefer not to." The reader learns nothing about his history before the last paragraph, where it is revealed that he had a job as a clerk in the Dead Letter Office—one that the narrator surmises may well have rendered him so depressed at human existence and suffering that he eventually gives up on life. Yet the narrator never considers the possibility that the nature of work in his own office could be contributing to his employee's despair. Bartleby has no meaningful human relationships. It's almost as if he does not exist at all, a concept emphasized by the narrator's description of him as pale and ghostlike. At one point, the narrator pictures him in a "winding sheet" used to wrap dead bodies.

Bartleby's only interactions are with the narrator, and they nearly drive the narrator mad. This is no wonder, as Bartleby's responses are often absurd. For example, when the narrator tries to help Bartleby find a more suitable job, he declines each time. He uses the same words, "I am not particular." Yet he is extremely particular to the point where the narrator is unable to ever get him to agree to anything. Bartleby seems unwilling to make a decision or take action and simply repeats the same actions—or inaction—throughout the story.

It is the narrator's response to Bartleby that shapes the plot. Bartleby's presence causes the narrator to rethink his priorities and assumptions. His telling of Bartleby's story is an attempt to

lessen the guilt he feels over his former employee's death.

The Narrator

The narrator's life revolves around work. Though he describes himself as unambitious, he is proud of his work and that his clients "consider [him] an eminently *safe* man." His business flourishes as he does "a snug business among rich men's bonds and mortgages and title-deeds." These rich men include John Jacob Astor, the most well-off man in the United States. When referring to his association with Astor, the narrator is positively giddy. He even enjoys saying Astor's name, although he doesn't name himself. His only identity comes from his profession.

At the same time, the narrator wants to make his life as easy and comfortable as possible; his motto is "the easiest way of life is the best." He is blind to the fact that, in refusing to take certain actions, he is very similar to Bartleby. He is, therefore, both prone to tolerate Bartleby's eccentricities longer than most employers would do and supremely vexed by his behavior.

Bartleby's noncompliance, and his refusal to provide a reason not to comply, is a daunting puzzle for the narrator. However, his concern with propriety causes him to make excuses for Bartleby and to pardon his behavior for most of the story. He has made excuses for his employees before; both Turkey and Nippers have their quirks, yet he sees them as useful. One of the reasons the narrator hires Bartleby is because he believes the new hire "might operate beneficially upon the flighty temper of Turkey, and the fiery one of Nippers." So when Bartleby begins refusing to do work, the narrator assumes he has simply hired another quirky employee. Taking action that might be awkward and uncomfortable does not seem necessary based on the narrator's past experience as an employer.

By the time the narrator comes to realize that Bartleby's issues are serious and not mere quirks, he does not know how to deal with the situation. He simply makes excuses and carries on as if everything is normal. It is only when his business is threatened that the narrator finally takes action and moves to another office.

It is the threat to his business that causes the greatest disturbance to the narrator. When the narrator's professional friends start questioning Bartleby's purpose, he takes his most

dramatic action of switching offices. Even then, the narrator says, "I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of." On multiple occasions the narrator notes how he pities Bartleby. He offers his home to Bartleby so they can come up with "some convenient arrangement for [him]." Other times he loses patience or rushes away. He has no clue how to deal with Bartleby's disturbance of the workplace that also functions as the narrator's surrogate home.

The narrator makes numerous references to charity as he attempts to help Bartleby, but he admits that his efforts are meant to help him think better of himself—to "cheaply purchase a delicious self-approval." It is self-interest, he says, that should "prompt all beings to charity." This interpretation, however, is in direct conflict with the Christian gospel he quotes: "A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another." The narrator does not love Bartleby, and as critic Thomas Dilworth has pointed out, his story can be read as a response to the guilt he feels over this failure. Bartleby's behavior does indeed "unman" the narrator, as it brings out his lack of humanity.

The narrator has another reason to feel guilty; his position as Master in Chancery requires him to handle paperwork for foreclosed properties, including those acquired by John Jacob Astor. Dilworth further suggests that the narrator's guilt over forcing people from their homes might have motivated him to allow Bartleby to stay on at the office. He tries to make up to one man for the harm he has done to many others.

At the end of the story, the narrator is able to recognize his subject's humanity and the way in which the tragedy of Bartleby's existence underscores the absurdity of human life. This realization marks the narrator as the only character who has changed and grown over the course of the story.

Office Workers

The fact that the other office workers don't have names is noticeable in *Bartleby, the Scrivener*. All three—Turkey, Nippers, and Ginger Nut—have nicknames based on a single dimension of their characters. The narrator goes unnamed. The only primary character with a name is Bartleby.

The office workers are portrayed as second-class citizens. Their status does not entitle them to be named. Instead they are flat characters, dehumanized by their tedious, repetitious, and low-level work as scriveners.

Turkey is a man of near 60 who gets drunk every afternoon. He does not dress well, which the narrator says is because he cannot afford "such a lustrous face and a lustrous coat at one and the same time." Turkey's life has been spent at a job where he cannot get ahead. He drinks seemingly as a form of escape from his tedious position.

Nippers is not content with his situation. The narrator says he has two clear qualities: ambition and indigestion. The two may be related. He is hungry to rise up and make something better of himself. He dresses smoothly, has his own personal clients, and is a ward-politician.

Ginger Nut is only 12 years old. His father, a laborer, has gotten him the job with the hopes his son will learn the law and have a better job than himself. Instead of being an apprentice and learning about being a lawyer, Ginger Nut is an errand boy. Unlike the others, the reasoning behind his nickname is clear: he fetches ginger nuts for his colleagues.

Finally there is Bartleby, the one character who has a name. It is not clearly a first or last name and offers no hints about his nationality or background. While some information is shared about the other characters, nothing is revealed about Bartleby until the last paragraph of the story. There the reader learns about his work at the Dead Letter Office. Despite this tidbit and his name, Bartleby (like the others) is faceless. He distinguishes himself from the other workers only by taking a stand against the dullness of their routine.

Wall Street and Capitalism

The story's full title is *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall-Street*, and Wall Street looms large on the story.

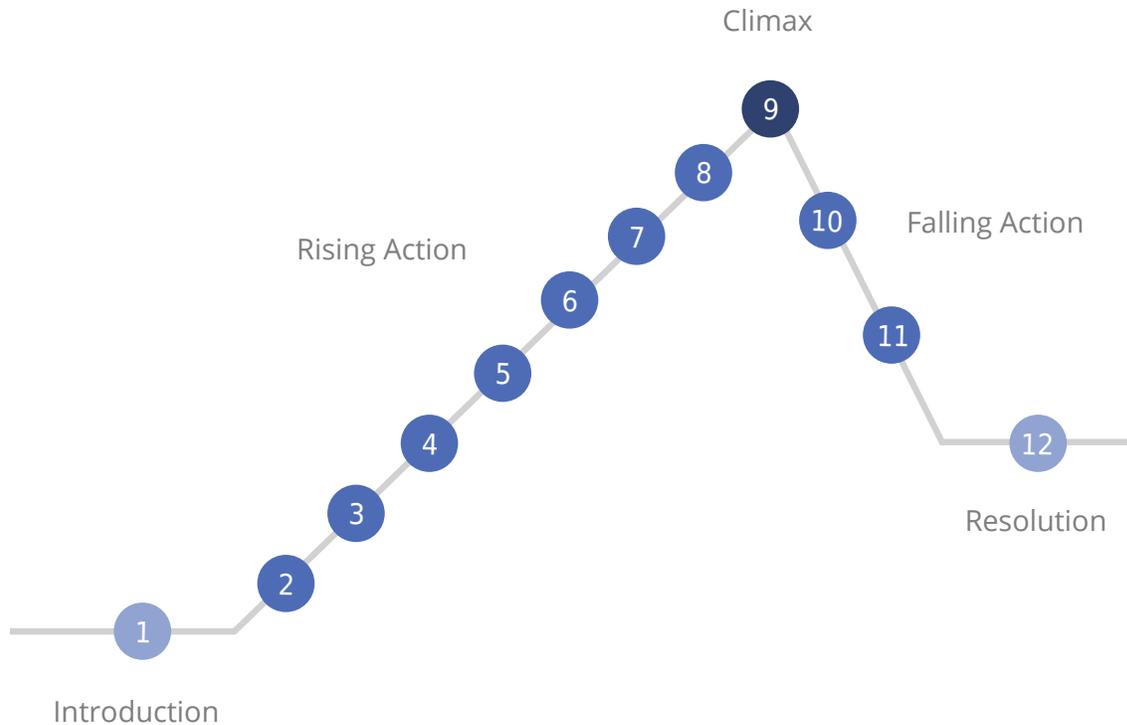
As the center of American finance, Wall Street represents capitalism in the story. Many Americans have made their fortunes by trading in Wall Street's stock exchanges. The interactions between the wealthy narrator and his meagerly paid office workers suggest the way in which the investment industry benefits only those who can afford to invest.

The issues that plague capitalism are played out every day in the narrator's office. The scriveners represent the lower-class workers. While two of the employees (Nippers and Ginger Nut) dream of prosperity, they are trapped doing mind-numbing labor. They simply copy what their superiors have already done.

The company's profits are in the hands of the narrator, a manager. He is the driving force in the office, and everything that happens—with the single exception of Bartleby's passive resistance—revolves around his business and its needs. The narrator's employees are viewed and measured by their usefulness as labor.

Bartleby confuses everything. He is a member of the working class but refuses to use his own manual labor to enrich his employer. His refusal to work can be viewed as a protest against a system that does not fairly reward his labor. It can also be viewed as detrimental behavior caused by an overwhelming and isolating existence. All of this occurs on Wall Street, the home of capitalism, where Bartleby's refusal to work is particularly disquieting to the narrator, who is comfortable and content with the system as it is.

Plot Diagram



Introduction

1. The narrator introduces himself and his employees.

Rising Action

2. Bartleby is hired by the narrator.
3. Bartleby declines to do work.
4. The narrator discovers Bartleby is living in the office.
5. Bartleby refuses to do any work at all.
6. The narrator gives Bartleby an ultimatum.
7. The narrator's associates wonder about Bartleby.
8. The narrator moves office to get away from Bartleby.

Climax

9. Bartleby refuses the narrator's help. He goes to jail.

Falling Action

10. The narrator visits an angry Bartleby in jail.
11. The narrator discovers Bartleby's dead body.

Resolution

12. The narrator notes Bartleby's previous job.

Timeline of Events

Beginning of Bartleby era

The narrator hires Bartleby.

Some time later

The narrator discovers Bartleby is living at the narrator's office.

Some time later

After Bartleby refuses to leave the office, the narrator moves out of it.

A few days later

Bartleby is imprisoned in the Tombs for vagrancy; the narrator visits him.

A few months later

The narrator learns that Bartleby once worked in the Dead Letter Office.

Pre-Bartleby era

The narrator introduces himself and each of his employees.

Three days later

Bartleby begins rejecting work assigned by the narrator.

Two days later

Bartleby stops working altogether.

A few days later

Tenants from the old office building ask the narrator to intervene with Bartleby.

A few days later

The narrator discovers that Bartleby has died, seemingly from starvation.

“” Quotes

"Bartleby was one of those beings of whom nothing is ascertainable."

— Narrator

Before getting to the heart of the story, the narrator briefly introduces the title character. Even with the passage of time the narrator is still puzzled by the behavior of his former employee.

"A profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best."

— Narrator

The narrator does not believe in conflict and is ready to take the easy way out. His actions show he strives to maintain the status quo of the capitalist system of Wall Street. It is this belief system that Bartleby challenges.

"All who know me, consider me an eminently safe man."

— Narrator

This attribute has served the narrator well in terms of his business practice. However, he is not adept at managing his employees. He accepts their eccentricities because he judges their impact on his business to be minimal.

"I can see that figure now—pallidly neat, pitiably respectable, incurably forlorn!"

— Narrator

The contrasting language of this quote highlights the complexity of Bartleby's character. Though the adverbs suggest his pitiful, ghostlike manner, the adjectives describe a decent person.

"I would prefer not to."

— Bartleby

Bartleby uses this phrase throughout the story. While he declines politely, ultimately he only does what he chooses to do.

"Meanwhile Bartleby sat in his hermitage, oblivious to every thing but his own peculiar business there."

— Narrator

Bartleby is indifferent to those around him, and his bizarre behavior emphasizes his isolation. His actions serve his intended purpose of shutting himself off from the world around him. The narrator's words also show his inability to truly try to understand his employee.

"Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance."

— Narrator

Bartleby's form of resistance confuses and frustrates the narrator because he cannot understand why his employee will not respond to what he views as charitable actions on his behalf.

"It was his wonderful mildness

chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were."

— Narrator

The narrator is unsure of how to deal with Bartleby. While he does get frustrated and even angry with Bartleby, the narrator continues to try to help him. He's more accustomed to working with more assertive types, and Bartleby's meekness serves as a threat to the narrator's more masculine and direct way of handling situations.

"It was his soul that suffered, and his soul I could not reach."

— Narrator

The narrator feels pity for Bartleby and would like to help him. Despite his attempts at kindness and decency, the narrator is unable to reach Bartleby's soul, which is gripped by helplessness.

"The next day ... Bartleby did nothing but stand at his window in his dead-wall revery."

— Narrator

The narrator sees that Bartleby stares out the window at nothing. This highlights Bartleby's isolation and ill health.

"I am not particular."

— Bartleby

The narrator is making a last-ditch effort to find a job or situation that will work for Bartleby. He rejects a number of options, which shows he is indeed very particular.

"With kings and counselors."

— Narrator

Upon discovering Bartleby's dead body, the narrator quotes from the Book of Job to the grub-man, as if comparing Bartleby to the Bible's most famous sufferer.

"Ah Bartleby! Ah humanity!"

— Narrator

In the last lines of the story, the narrator reflects on the absurdity of Bartleby's life and of human existence.

Symbols

Walls

The walls represent isolation and separation. Bartleby's office is carved out of the office of his boss, the narrator. The office is separated like this so the narrator could "avail [himself] of his services on such trivial occasions." Bartleby's only purpose is to serve his boss and be at his beck and call. The separation is clear: Bartleby is to work until called upon by the narrator. At such time when called upon, Bartleby is to come out from behind the wall and answer to the narrator.

Bartleby's office has one window that looks out upon a brick wall "black by age and everlasting shade." The narrator notes Bartleby would spend long periods of time staring out at the "dead brick wall." What Bartleby is looking at or for is not clear. He is, however, isolating himself from others with only the dead brick wall to occupy his thoughts. His deterioration in behavior and health could stem from a rejection of the soul-destroying capitalist system represented by Wall Street.

Other windows in the office look out at walls or have no view. Thus, there are walls within the office and without, including the street that gives the story's setting and subtitle its name.

Death

Bartleby's employment in the Dead Letter Office is the only personal detail revealed about him. The letters represent a wide spectrum of unrealized potential—both good and bad. The hopelessness of sorting cartloads of undeliverable letters in order to send them off to be burnt is overwhelming, as is the knowledge that the missed letters must have caused enormous suffering. Bartleby leaves this experience (only after being let go) with a sense of hopelessness, and goes on to a new position where he is again dealing with "dead" documents: copies.

Bartleby and death seem to go together. He is described as if he were dead many times in the story: like a ghost, pale, cadaverous, motionless. On multiple occasions the narrator notes Bartleby would stare off in "dead wall revery." The narrator himself speculates it is Bartleby's job of sorting letters that were sent to people who are dead that overwhelmed him. He says, "Dead letters! does it not sound like dead men?" The letters take their toll on Bartleby's soul. It is only a matter of time until he dies a literal death as well.

Themes

Language

Bartleby limits his language in the story. He hardly says anything other than his often-repeated phrase, "I would prefer not to." The phrase can be read in multiple ways. It's a positive declaration as opposed to "No," which can be seen as too assertive. The gentleness of the phrase solicits the narrator's pity and causes him to be more obliging toward Bartleby. At the same time, the phrase asserts Bartleby's own will over that of the person requesting something of him. From the perspective of Romanticism, this is an expression of his individuality.

A scrivener's job is to be a human copy machine. Therefore, scriveners duplicate language rather than create it. In the story they are copying dry and impersonal legal documents.

The job of scrivener follows Bartleby's work in the Dead Letter Office. According to the narrator, the letters contain love, pathos, and real human language. Bartleby's job is to destroy these letters, which means that it was his job to destroy language—"communication" itself. Thus, his job of destroying the letters is a likely contributor to his disinclination to speak or to continue to do his copying work.

Passivity

When Bartleby stops working and becomes a squatter, the narrator is unsure of how to handle the unwanted guest. His emotions include pity, rage, sympathy, concern, and anger. Whatever his emotions, the narrator never takes concrete action. At one point the narrator tells Bartleby he has six days to move out. When Bartleby does not comply, the narrator does nothing. The only way he rids himself of Bartleby is when he, as the renter of the office space, moves away. For a person who has lived with "a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best," taking concrete action proves challenging.

Bartleby's defining characteristic is passivity. Bartleby is never active. He stops working, does not leave the office (until forced), and refuses to "quit" the narrator. Even Bartleby's death—starvation—comes because of inaction. Bartleby's "passive resistance" against the meaninglessness of his work and life is the basis of the story. The tactics of nonviolent resistance had been used for political means in America since the boycotts of the Colonial era and would be used by later world leaders such as Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr.

Responsibility

To whom or what is a person responsible? The narrator debates this question throughout the story. The narrator notes Turkey and Nippers have certain "eccentricities" that limit their productivity. Despite this, the narrator retains their services as they are useful to him and his business. The narrator takes responsibility for Ginger Nut (from the boy's father). He is supposed to be teaching Ginger Nut the law trade, yet he has become an errand boy and is not learning. Ultimately, the

narrator cares about his business. The one obligation he takes most responsibility for is the satisfaction of his clients.

Therefore, Bartleby's refusal to do work is a great challenge to the narrator. Work needs to get done for the business, and Bartleby become[s] "a millstone to [the narrator]." In fact Bartleby accepts no responsibility for fulfilling the duties of his job. The narrator's natural instinct is to get rid of Bartleby once he is no longer productive. Throughout the story the narrator wrestles with this instinct and strives to determine what level of responsibility he has for Bartleby. The story can be read as an expression of the guilt he feels at his failure to save Bartleby from suicide by starvation.

Isolation

Bartleby completely isolates himself from the world. He engages in no meaningful conversation throughout the story and does not speak unless addressed first. The only person to whom Bartleby responds is the narrator. His usual phrase—"I would prefer not to" (occasionally he drops the word *would*)—is repeated over 20 times in the story. Bartleby's lack of interest in communicating isolates him from the world at large.

Social classes are also isolated in the story. The narrator is a business owner and in the middle or upper-middle class. His employees are in the working class. While they come together at the workplace, they remain separated. This is emphasized by the physical partitions in the office. There is a wall separating the scribes and the narrator, there is a wall separating Bartleby from everyone else, and, of course, they work on Wall Street. The narrator's knowledge about his employees only comes from their work performance. He does not even use their real names. There is a distinct lack of cordiality between the narrator and the employees (as well as among themselves).

Christianity

There are many biblical allusions in the story. The narrator refers to himself and Bartleby as "sons of Adam," the first man

created by God in the Bible's Book of Genesis. The reference implies that the two are brothers. When Bartleby first refuses to obey the narrator, the latter says he was "turned into a pillar of salt" for a few moments, like Lot's wife, who meets her fate after ignoring the warning of angels not to look back at the evil city she is fleeing. As the narrator is tempted by the "old Adam of resentment," he sheds the emotion by recalling Jesus's words, "A new commandment give I unto you, that ye love one another." And when the narrator is asked near the end of the story if Bartleby is asleep, he replies, "With kings and counselors," a phrase from the Book of Job. The biblical character Job, like Bartleby, suffers from great torment before he is relieved of his suffering.

Is Bartleby a Christ-like figure, sacrificed to the cold Wall Street mentality? This is one reading of the story. The narrator at first tries to extend Christian charity toward his wayward employee, then rejects him and ultimately denies his responsibility toward him several times (as Peter denies Christ three times in the Gospels). Bartleby at the story's end is dead but described as "profoundly sleeping," as if awaiting resurrection. Another possible reading of the Christian imagery is that the narrator, for all his attempts to help Bartleby, simply failed to love him as a Christian should do.

Suggested Reading

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