Bartleby the Scrivener, A Tale of Wall Street Study Guide

Bartleby the Scrivener, A Tale of Wall Street by Herman Melville

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

"Bartleby the Scrivener" was written by Herman Melville in 1853 and was first published in *Putnam's Magazine* in the November/December issue of that year. The plot involves one man's difficulty in coping with his employee's peculiar form of passive resistance. One day, Bartleby the scrivener announces that he "would prefer not to" follow his employer's orders or even to be "a little reasonable." The resulting tragedy follows from Bartleby's inability or unwillingness to articulate the reasons for his rebellion and from his employer's inability to comprehend Bartleby's reasons for resisting and ultimate unwillingness to accommodate him. The story has been interpreted by critics in numerous ways. Most have viewed it as a work of social criticism dealing with the psychological effects of capitalism as it existed in the 1850s. Others have viewed it as a philosophical meditation on the human condition, or as a religious parable on religion itself. However one interprets its ultimate meaning, the story provides an exploration into such universal issues of the human experience as alienation, passivity, nonconformity, and psychological imprisonment. The story's enduring appeal largely stems from its well-crafted ambiguity. It is highly admired for its remarkable ability to accommodate multiple interpretations.

Author Biography

Herman Melville was born in New York City on August 1,1819. He was the son of Allan Melville, a successful merchant, and Maria Gansevoort Melville, who came from an old New York family of distinction and wealth. Although their family name was well respected, the Melvilles went bankrupt in 1830. Allan Melville tried to re-establish his business in Albany, New York, but his financial burdens drove him to a mental and physical breakdown. In 1832, when Herman was twelve, his father died, leaving the Melville family heavily burdened by debt. The experience of his father's financial ruin and mental collapse left a deep impression on the young Melville, who later explored issues of sanity and the pressures of capitalism in such stories as "Bartleby the Scrivener."

After his father's death, Melville left school and worked odd jobs. Melville briefly considered becoming a legal scrivener but was unable to secure a job. In 1839 he signed on as a sailor and spent the next five years at sea. In 1842 he jumped ship in the Marquesas Islands of the South Pacific during a whaling voyage and spent several months living among a tribe of cannibals in the Taipi Valley. While traveling en route to Tahiti after being picked up by an Australian whaler, Melville was imprisoned by the British Consul for refusing duty on the ship. He then escaped from Tahiti and made his way on various whaling ships to Honolulu, Hawaii, where he was mustered into the United States Naval Service. In 1844 Melville was discharged from the Navy and returned to New York, where he soon embarked on a literary career.

In the 1840s, Melville began writing novels based on his sea adventures, and his books proved to be extremely popular with readers and critics. Titles included *Typee* (1846), *Omoo* (1847), *Redburn* (1849), and *White-Jacket* (1850). In 1847, at the height of Ms popular success, he married Elizabeth Shaw, the daughter of Massachusetts Chief Justice Lemuel Shaw. As Melville's literary ambitions grew, he soon resented the reputation he had earned as "the man who lived among the cannibals." Encouraged by his friendship with writer Nathaniel Hawthorne, Melville began to publish more serious and philosophical novels, including *Mardi* (1849) and his greatest achievement, *Moby Dick* (1851). While disheartened by the poor reception of these novels, Melville stubbornly persisted in challenging the public with experimental works like *Pierre* (1852) and *The Confidence Man* (1857). To sustain an income, he published short stones in monthly periodicals. Unfortunately, the harsh criticism and commercial failure of his later novels forced a severely depressed Melville to abandon his literary career by the late 1850s. At the urging of Justice Shaw, Melville traveled to Europe and the Near East to restore his mental health and then returned to New York in 1866 to become a customs inspector—a job he held for the next twenty years. Adding to the tragedy of his later years, Melville's oldest son, Malcolm, committed suicide in 1867. On September 28, 1891, Herman Melville died a bitter and forgotten writer at the age of seventy-two. An unpublished story, "Billy Budd," was found among his personal papers and published to critical acclaim in 1924.

Plot Summary

The Law Office on Wall Street

The narrator of "*Bartleby* the Scrivener" begins the story by introducing the reader to the law office on Wall Street of which he was the manager when he first met Bartleby. The narrator describes himself as an unambitious, elderly lawyer who has enjoyed a comfortable tenure as Master in Chancery. Before hiring Bartleby, the narrator—henceforth referred to as the lawyer—employed two law-copyists, or scriveners, and one office boy. The lawyer describes each of his employees in turn The elder scrivener, nicknamed Turkey, is neanng sixty and it is implied that he drinks heavily on his lunch hour. The other scrivener, who goes by the nickname Nippers, is younger and considered overly ambitious by the narrator. The office boy is called Ginger Nut after the cakes which he brings to the two scriveners

Bartleby's Peculiar Resistance

Because of an increased work load at his office, the lawyer is forced to hire a third scrivener. He hires Bartleby mostly on account of his sedate and respectable demeanor, which he hopes will temper the manners of his other two scriveners. The lawyer situates Bartleby behind a high folding screen and in front of a window that looks out upon a wall. Bartleby is quietly industrious in his work until the third day, when he is asked to proofread some documents. To the lawyer's astonishment, Bartleby responds to his request with the simple reply, "I would prefer not to." The lawyer feels the urge to dismiss Bartleby instantly, but he finds himself unnerved by Bartleby's perfect composure. A few days later, the lawyer asks Bartleby again to proofread some documents with the other scriveners. Once again, Bartleby declines with the curt refusal, "I would prefer not to." This time the narrator attempts to reason with Bartleby and demands a fuller explanation of his unwillingness. When Bartleby will not respond, the lawyer points to the reasonableness of his request and appeals to Bartleby's common sense. Failing to sway him, the lawyer entreats Turkey. Nippers, and even Ginger Nut to attest to the reasonableness of the request. They comply, but Bartleby remains unmoved. Vexed by Bartleby's resistance, the lawyer carries on with business, unwilling to take any action. The next day, Bartleby again refuses to proofread and also refuses to run an errand, each time explaining softly. "I would prefer not to." While Turkey offers to "black his eyes," the lawyer instead chooses to tolerate Bartleby's disobedience without punishment.

The lawyer stops by the office on a Sunday on his way to church. To his surprise, he discovers that Bartleby has been living in the office, apparently because he has no other home. At first the lawyer pities Bartleby's state of loneliness, but upon reflection his feelings turn to fear and repulsion. He observes that Bartleby does not read or converse with people and sometimes stands for long periods staring blankly out at the walls.

Finally, the lawyer resolves to ask Bartleby about his history and his life and to dismiss him if he will not answer.

The Lawyer Attempts to Rid Himself of Bartleby

The next morning, the lawyer questions Bartleby about his personal life. Bartleby replies that he prefers not to answer. The lawyer begs Bartleby to cooperate and be reasonable, but Bartleby responds that he prefers not to be reasonable. The lawyer resolves that he must rid himself of Bartleby before the rebellion spreads to the other scriveners—who, he notes, have begun to use the expression "prefer" for the first time—but he takes no immediate action. The next day, Bartleby informs the lawyer that he has given up copying—the one task that he had been willing to perform previously. Several more days pass. Finally, the lawyer is satisfied that Bartleby will never resume his work. He tells Bartleby that he must vacate the premises by the end of six days. At the end of the sixth day, the lawyer reminds Bartleby that he must leave, gives him his wages plus twenty dollars, and tells him goodbye. The next day Bartleby is still there. Exasperated, the lawyer decides that he will not use physical force or call the police, remembering the Bible's injunction '"that ye love one another." Instead, he attempts to conduct his business as usual, ignoring the fact that Bartleby inhabits his office without working and refuses to leave. This state of affairs lasts until the lawyer becomes aware that Bartleby's presence in his office has become the subject of much gossip which has jeopardized his professional reputation. Unable to convince Bartleby to leave and unwilling to bear the whispers about him, the lawyer decides to move his office to a new location. When a new office space has been secured, the lawyer removes all of his possessions from the old office, leaving Bartleby standing in an empty room. He again gives Bartleby money and abandons him with some regret. A few days later, a stranger visits the lawyer's new office and insists that he come and get Bartleby. The lawyer refuses. Several days later a small crowd entreats him to do something about Bartleby, who is still inhabiting the old office. Fearing exposure in the papers, the lawyer speaks to Bartleby and tries to induce him to leave. He interrogates Bartleby as to what he would like to do and suggests several occupations. Finally, the lawyer invites Bartleby to come home with him and live there until he can decide what he would like to do. Bartleby declines this offer, and the lawyer flees from the scene, telling himself that there is nothing more he can do to help. After a short vacation, the lawyer returns to work to find a note from his previous landlord stating that Bartleby has been taken to prison. This decisive action satisfies the lawyer, who agrees in retrospect that there was no other alternative.

Bartleby Dies in Prison

The lawyer visits the prison, where he makes a sympathetic report about Bartleby to the police and asks that Bartleby be removed to the poor house. The lawyer then visits Bartleby, who is unwilling to speak with him and stares blankly at the prison wall. When he discovers that Bartleby has not been eating, the lawyer tips the grub-man a few dollars to be sure that Bartleby gets dinner. The lawyer returns to the prison a few days

later and finds Bartleby lying dead in the prison courtyard. Apparently having starved himself to death, Bartleby's withered body is found curled up, eyes open, facing the prison wall. To conclude his tale, the lawyer offers the reader a vague rumor about Bartleby as a possible explanation of his behavior. This famous passage concludes the story: "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!"

Detailed Summary & Analysis

Summary

"Bartleby the Scrivener" is the short story of an odd character involved in the singularly dull occupation of copying legal documents in a Wall Street law office during the 1800s. The lawyer who hires Bartleby narrates the story. The story was originally published in *Putnam's* magazine in December 1953, two years after author Herman Melville wrote "Moby Dick." The magazine paid Melville $85 for the manuscript.

Most of the action takes place within the lawyer's office, or rooms, as Melville calls them. These rooms are located on the second floor of a building trapped between tall buildings on either side. Little if any light is able to reach the two small windows in the rooms. These windows look out at two walls—one black, one white. These dreary offices set the scene for an equally dreary tale about the condition of humanity.

The lawyer, who is never named, begins the story with an apparently honest self-description. He says he is an elderly man, close to 60 years old, who has practiced law for 30 years. He notes that he is unambitious and makes a very important self-disclosure when he says his profound conviction is that, "The easiest way of life is the best."

The lawyer/narrator's business consists mostly of handling titles, bonds and mortgages. He does a tidy business thanks to his appointment as a Master in Chancery. This office, bestowed upon him by the State of New York, made him clerk of the court of equity and meant that many clients of the court must bring their legal paperwork to him. When the state ended the practice of making such appointments, the narrator allows himself a rare moment of outrage at his loss of income.

The lawyer has three employees besides Bartleby. He refers to the three by the nicknames Turkey, Nippers and Ginger Nut. Turkey and Nippers, like Bartleby, are scriveners, or men who copy legal documents by hand. Ginger Nut is a 12-year-old office boy. Each employee has his own idiosyncrasies, or peculiar traits or habits.

Turkey is a short, round Englishman distinguished by his red face. The lawyer notes that Turkey's face goes through a predictable cycle of color each day. The redness grows throughout the morning and reaches its peak shortly after noon. The color then gradually fades through the afternoon. Turkey is not neat in his personal habits or in his work. Though his work in the morning hours is exemplary, from the moment his face reaches its peak color the quality of his work begins to decline. The narrator chooses mostly to overlook the noise and mess that characterizes Turkey's afternoon work. This passive attitude foreshadows the narrator's later dealings with Bartleby.

Nippers is the most ambitious character in the story. His employer describes his 25-year-old scrivener as looking somewhat like a pirate. Nippers holds a small political

office and enjoys the perceived sense of importance that gives him. His work habits are on the opposite schedule of Turkey's. He is irritable and moody in the morning. The narrator attributes this to indigestion. In his moodiness, he grinds his teeth and fiddles incessantly with the height of his writing table. All in all, the lawyer finds Nippers' work to be useful and acceptable. Ginger Nut runs errands for the lawyer. He sweeps the offices, and buys Spitzenbergs (apples) and ginger cakes for the copyists. His salary is $1 per week.

Into this small cast of characters Melville introduces the story's antagonist, Bartleby. Bartleby answers the lawyer's advertisement for an additional scrivener. The lawyer's first impression is that Bartleby is neat, respectable, quiet and somewhat forlorn. He believes Bartleby will be a calming influence on the office and so places the new hire's writing table on the same side of the glass folding doors as his own desk. He puts a green folding screen around Bartleby's desk to offer some privacy, much like the office cubicle of today is used to define a semi-private space.

For the first two days Bartleby is everything the lawyer hoped for. He works diligently, almost mechanically, and copies a great number of pages. Bartleby earns four cents for each 100 words, a quantity referred to as a folio. On the third day of employment, the story's conflict is introduced.

The lawyer asks Bartleby to assist in proofreading a document. This was a common part of a law copyist's job. Bartleby's reply to the simple request is the defining line of the short story. He says simply, "I would prefer not to." These five words unsettle the lawyer/narrator's rather predictable, well-ordered world. Bartleby should be fired for his insubordination, or refusal to submit to authority. The lawyer, however, hesitates because of Bartleby's calm, distant, almost inhuman composure. The lawyer calls Nippers to proofread the document and goes on about business as usual.

A few days later, the lawyer calls on Bartleby to help in checking the accuracy of his own work. This task will require the entire office because four copies must be compared with the original. Again Bartleby politely states that he prefers not to help. The lawyer tries to reason with Bartleby who firmly refuses to change his position. This leads to a debate among all the employees about Bartleby. Ginger Nut declares him "a little luny." Nippers believes he should be fired. The lawyer takes no action.

After this incident, the lawyer begins to observe Bartleby more closely and notices that the scrivener never leaves the area behind his screen, does not drink either coffee or tea and apparently eats nothing other than the ginger nut cakes delivered by the office boy. He never speaks except to answer a question.

The days pass with Bartleby still preferring not to examine documents but working steadily at his copying. By now, Turkey has offered to give Bartleby a black eye for his refusals and Nippers has pointed out that Bartleby's behavior is unfair to the other copyists.

The lawyer's discomfort is growing. He spends hours in internal debate over what to do about Bartleby. He repeatedly chooses to extend charity to his employee. Bartleby apparently has no family or friends the lawyer can call on to take the problem off his hands. He feels a certain moral responsibility to care for this man he has hired.

One Sunday, the lawyer decides to stop by his offices on the way to church. He finds Bartleby locked inside and realizes that the scrivener has been living in the rooms. This fact adds to the mystery and the dilemma posed by Bartleby. The lawyer is being forced to action and decides he will question Bartleby on Monday morning. If Bartleby refuses to answer his questions, the lawyer determines to give him his wages plus $20 for expenses and fire him.

The reader should not be surprised that Bartleby prefers not to be reasonable and answer the lawyer's questions. This lawyer notices that Bartleby's presence is influencing even the way he and his other employee's speak. The word "prefer" has crept into their vocabulary. Still, the narrator delays following through on his intentions to dismiss Bartleby.

At this point, the conflict rises to a new level. The next day, Bartleby does nothing but stare out of his window at the blackened brick wall. He tells the lawyer he has decided to do no more copying. The lawyer attributes this refusal to eyestrain, a common occupational hazard of scriveners. He encourages Bartleby to rest his eyes for a few days and get outside for some exercise. Bartleby does nothing more than stare out the window and refuse requests to run errands.

Bartleby never returns to copying legal documents. After several days, the lawyer finally tells Bartleby he cannot remain in his office. The lawyer informs Bartleby he must leave within six days and offers to help him find new living quarters and even another job. Bartleby rejects all offers of assistance.

The conflict climaxes at the end of the six days. When the lawyer looks behind the screen and finds Bartleby still in his usual place, he offers him $32—$12 in wages and another $20 in compassion. Bartleby refuses the money and the lawyer leaves it on the desk and tells Bartleby he must be gone before morning.

Throughout the night the lawyer is consumed with thoughts of Bartleby. He anxiously approaches of his office the next morning and finds Bartleby still there. The lawyer once again chooses charity over action, believing that Bartleby will come to his end if he throws him out or calls the police.

So Bartleby remains, but self-interest eventually forces the lawyer into desperate action. When his legal peers begin to comment on the odd man who occupies a desk in his office but apparently does no work, the lawyer decides to escape from his problem. He moves out of his offices and leaves Bartleby behind.

But the conflict is not yet resolved. The tenants and landlord of his former building contact the lawyer and ask him to come back and deal with Bartleby who now roams the building and sleeps in doorways. The lawyer returns to his former office to talk to

Bartleby. As a last attempt at charity he invites the scrivener to his own home. When Bartleby refuses this offer, the lawyer literally runs as far from the problem as he can. He gets on a bus and takes an unscheduled "vacation" to New York and New Jersey, trying to purge Bartleby from his mind.

When he returns, he learns that Bartleby has been arrested as a vagrant and sent to the Tombs, a common name for the city prison. The lawyer visits Bartleby, who is allowed to walk about the prison courtyard. Bartleby refuses to acknowledge the lawyer's presence and continues to stare at the prison walls. The lawyer offers the sentiment that at least Bartleby can enjoy the grass and the sky. Bartleby delivers his most expressive dialogue when he says, "I know where I am."

The lawyer still attempts to show charity by arranging for Bartleby to have extra food in prison. Bartleby rejects this offer. When the lawyer returns to the prison a few days later, he finds Bartleby lying dead, curled up on the grass, his eyes still open and staring at the wall.

The brief epilogue reveals the telling fact that Bartleby once worked in the dead letter office in Washington, D.C. until he was displaced during a political restructuring. The lawyer considers this bit of information about the complex creature who has caused him so much distress and sighs, "Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!

Analysis

To understand a story, it helps to consider the author's background and his relationship to his setting and his subjects. Herman Melville wrote "Bartleby the Scrivener" in 1853, two years after he had published "Moby Dick." While "Moby Dick" is highly regarded today, the literary community initially shunned Melville's novel. The book's failure was quite depressing for the author and his despair was reflected in his writing.

Melville chose Wall Street as the setting for "Bartleby the Scrivener." Melville knew Wall Street well. He was born in the neighborhood and later worked in the area as a customs official. The author knew of the tedious labor scriveners and other workers did to help fuel the economic machine.

It might be easy to conclude that Melville has written a simple story pitting Bartleby (the antagonist) against the lawyer who tells the story (the protagonist). Just below the surface, however, the story's theme of humanity becomes evident. Humanity can be defined as the condition of being human and also the quality of being humane. Melville's short story addresses both.

It is interesting that Melville creates an almost inhuman character to provide a focal point for this discussion. Bartleby has no past we are aware of, no personality, no family or friends and no apparent regrets over these missing pieces of his humanity. The bust of Cicero, a Roman orator, which sits in the lawyer's office, symbolizes Bartleby's lifeless life. Many commentators have compared Bartleby to a piece of office equipment like a copy machine or scanner. Indeed at points in the story, Bartleby does seem to be

a mere office furnishing. But the lawyer sees something human in Bartleby's inhumanness, and that creates the story's conflict.

Melville's short story is more the lawyer's story than it is Bartleby's. The lawyer describes himself as a "safe man" who has neither great ambition nor great anxiety about his life. He is likeable and easy going, not uncaring but relatively unconcerned. His approach to life could represent most of humankind's.

We see early on that the lawyer is unwilling to really involve himself in the lives of others. He describes his employees in detail, but keeps himself distant from them, even refusing to directly address their work-related shortcomings. He is willing to let them be because that is the easiest course of action.

The lawyer's way of life works fine until Bartleby intrudes into his world. As Bartleby prefers not to do what the lawyer requests, the lawyer is forced to make decisions not only about his employee but also about life. Bartleby is the one who stands in the corner, but it is the lawyer/narrator who is being backed into a corner.

The most human aspect of Bartleby is the assertion of his will. Every time he says, "I would prefer not to," he is nearly screaming, "I am a human being! I can and will make choices concerning my own life." When Bartley's preferences are ultimately ignored and he is sent to the city prison, he gives up on life and dies. He has lost the one element of humanity that he seemed to possess.

Throughout the story, Bartleby's continuing declarations of his humanity threaten the lawyer's own will. The lawyer would prefer that Bartleby do as he asks; he would prefer that Bartleby not live in his offices; he would prefer that Bartleby leave when he was told. The lawyer struggles with the question of how to respond to Bartleby. Over and over again he chooses to respond with charity. Charity, as defined by the lawyer, is leaving Bartleby room to have his preferences even if they are unconventional.

The lawyer and Bartleby might have continued indefinitely in there relationship if the lawyer's reputation had not be been threatened. As long as Bartleby only made him personally uncomfortable, the lawyer allowed him to remain in his office. When others began to express discomfort and question the lawyer's motives and judgment he chose self-preservation over charity. Indeed his later offers of charity became attempts to save his own reputation.

Melville adds an interesting and telling fact about Bartleby in the story's epilogue. Here we learn that Bartleby had lost a position at the dead letter office in Washington, D.C. after a political restructuring. This event was foreshadowed in the story's opening pages when the lawyer tells of his own lost office as Master in Chancery. So both of the main characters have been displaced by the preferences of others. Both have suffered a loss of their humanity.

Much has been written about the symbolism of Bartleby coming from the dead letter office where his job probably was burning letters that could not be delivered. Did Melville choose this occupation to point out the dead end of all humanity or to explain

Bartleby's odd behavior? Melville also uses walls to symbolically depict the condition of humanity. We see walls in the opening description off the law offices, in the screen that separates Bartleby from the lawyer, and finally in the prison courtyard. Bartleby spends his time looking at these walls. What does he see? Limitations? Conventions? Hopelessness?

"Bartleby the Scrivener" raises questions about the value of humans, the role of compassion and the how our preferences, even if they seem of little concern to others, affect humanity as a whole.

Characters

Bartleby

The title character of the story, Bartleby, is hired by the lawyer as a scrivener, whose job is to copy out legal documents by hand. Bartleby is described as neat, pale, and forlorn. Although Bartleby's demeanor suggests sadness or discontent, he never expresses any emotion in the story and is described by the lawyer as "mechanical" in his actions. The plot of the story revolves around Bartleby's enigmatic refusal to carry out his employer's orders. When asked to perform a task, Bartleby frequently responds, "I would prefer not to." This peculiarly passive form of resistance causes his employer much consternation. Eventually, Bartleby refuses to do anything at all and simply stares vacantly at the wall. Bartleby is finally carried off to prison, where he starves himself to death. The reason for Bartleby's disturbed state of mind is never revealed, although the lawyer believes it may have something to do with a previous job that Bartleby may had held in the dead letter office of the U.S. Post Office. Because so little is learned about Bartleby in the story, critics have tended to interpret him in purely symbolic terms.

Ginger Nut

Ginger Nut is the nickname of the twelve-year-old boy hired to run small errands around the law office for a dollar a week. His name is derived from the ginger nut cakes that he brings every day to the two scriveners, Turkey and Nippers. Ginger Nut's father hopes that his job will one day help him enter a legal career. The lawyer describes him as quick-witted.

Lawyer

Although he is not the title character, the lawyer, who narrates the story, is arguably the key figure in "Bartleby the Scrivener." He is approximately sixty years old and holds the prestigious position of Master in Chancery. His job is widely viewed as a sinecure—a profitable position requiring little actual work that is given to relatives or friends of the very powerful. The lawyer describes himself as a "safe" and "unambitious" man. He seems to pride himself on his even temper, prudence, and gentility. Because the story is told from his point of view, determining the lawyer's prejudices and social outlook is crucial to an interpretation of the story. The narrative revolves around the lawyer's reactions to Bartleby's behavior. Some critics contend that the lawyer empathizes on some level with Bartleby's despair and find his intentions toward Bartleby generally admirable. Others view him as a pathetic figure whose supposedly "liberal" outlook only serves to mask (even from himself) his self-interest in exploiting and controlling the Bartlebys of the world.

Nippers

Nippers is the nickname of the younger scrivener in the law office. Nippers is described as a well-dressed young man about twenty-five years of age. The lawyer believes that Nippers suffers from indigestion in the mornings, which causes him to be restless and discontented. In the afternoon, his work is more steady. Nippers seems dissatisfied with his position as a scrivener. The lawyer believes him to be overly ambitious because he displays an unusual interest in the lawyer's business affairs, and he is often visited by suspicious-looking men to whom he refers as 'clients'' but who appear to be bill collectors.

Turkey

Turkey is the nickname of the elder scrivener in the law office. He is identified as an Englishman of approximately sixty years of age who wears dirty clothes. In the mornings, Turkey is industrious and able to ingratiate himself with his employer with his charming manners. In the afternoons, Turkey becomes irritable and insolent and his work becomes very sloppy. It is implied, but never stated, that Turkey's lunch hour is spent drinking alcohol.

Themes

Individualism/Peer Pressure

One of the primary themes of the story involves the pressure toward conformity in American business life that inhibits the creative development of the individual. It is not coincidental that the story is set on Wall Street, which is the center of American financial and business affairs. By choosing legal scriveners as his subject, Melville emphasizes the intellectually stultifying atmosphere of the business world, since scriveners create nothing of their own but instead mechanically copy the ideas and work of others In fact, the lawyer is initially attracted to Bartleby because he seems to lack a strong personality and independent will, making him seem like a model employee. Significantly, when Bartleby resists, he is either unable or unwilling to explain the reason for his discontent Perhaps Bartleby's ability to think independently has been so damaged that he does not even have the words to express his own vague desires. In keeping with this theme, the lawyer himself fears nonconformity so much that he is moved to take action regarding Bartleby only when he hears that people are gossiping about his office arrangements.

Freedom and Imprisonment

Related to the theme of individualism in "Bartleby the Scrivener" is the issue of freedom. Walls are pervasive in the story. Symbolically, the office is located on Wall Street, and the office's windows look out onto walls on all sides. Bartleby has a tendency to stare blankly at the wall, lost in what the lawyer calls "a dead-wall reverie." Bartleby seems to feel imprisoned in his life, and it is significant that he eventually dies in prison. Through the character of Bartleby, Melville seems to be questioning the nature of human freedom. In a historical sense, it could be argued that Bartleby is trapped by the emerging capitalist economy which demands that he sell his time and labor in exchange for low wages. At the time, capitalism was often condemned by those suspicious of economic independence and referred to as "wage-slavery." In a philosophical sense, Bartleby may be trapped by the inability to grasp with certainty the underlying reason or meaning of existence.

Apathy and Passivity

Another theme of the story involves the apathy and passivity of both Bartleby and the lawyer. Bartleby's rebellion is one of inaction. He passively resists his employer's instructions and chooses instead to do nothing. Bartleby displays a disturbing degree of apathy about his own fate. When questioned by the lawyer as to what he would prefer to do if given the choice, Bartleby responds that he is not particular. In fact, nothing appeals to him. Eventually, Bartleby's inaction leads to his own death by starvation, which seems to be less the result of self-hatred than of a most profound indifference toward his own life. The lawyer in turn finds himself unable to take decisive action

regarding Bartleby's behavior, opting to procrastinate in hopes that the problem will solve itself. This attitude may indicate a level of coldness to Bartleby's suffering, since the lawyer appears to be concerned primarily with Bartleby's performance at work. In their own way, both characters are seized by an overpowering apathy towards their fellow men that paralyzes them.

Class Conflict

One of the primary tensions in the story involves the conflict of interest between the lawyer and his three scriveners. As an employer and the holder of a distinguished legal position, the lawyer inhabits a very different social world from the scriveners. Since the story is told through his eyes, part of the irony of "Bartleby the Scrivener" stems from the lawyer's inadvertent revelation of his class prejudices through his narration. For instance, at one point the lawyer describes his annoyance at Turkey's ragged wardrobe. He remarks condescendingly that he supposed one of "so small an income" probably could not afford a new coat, yet it never occurs to him that if he wished him to appear more respectable he could simply raise Turkey's wages. Also, the lawyer never considers the mind-numbing monotony of copying legal documents as a cause of his scriveners' eccentricities. Instead, he continually focuses on improving the productivity of his office at the expense of considering the well-being of his employees. The lawyer's insensitivity to the suffering of his employees foreshadows his inability to fathom Bartleby's discontent with his job.

Style

Setting

The setting of "Bartleby the Scrivener" is a crucial element in the story because it underscores Melville's concern about the effects of capitalism on American society. Significantly, the story is set on Wall Street in New York City, which had become the center of American financial and business life by the 1850s. The values of Wall Street are central to the story. The lawyer, who serves as the narrator, has an unabashed reverence for "the late John Jacob Astor," who was regarded as the most successful businessman of his time. The lawyer also reflects the values of Wall Street in his concern over such relatively superficial aspects of his employees as their appearance and dress. The work-oriented atmosphere of the office is devoid of friendliness and a sense of community. Indeed, the environment of Wall Street itself, Melville points out, is so business-oriented that after working hours it is reduced to an empty space "entirely unhallowed by humanizing domestic associations." Melville's descriptions of Wall Street convey a cold and alienating setting where the forging of close human ties is difficult

Point of View

Melville's use of an unreliable narrator is the stylistic technique most remarked upon by literary scholars who have examined "Bartleby the Scrivener." By relating the narrative from the lawyer's point of view, Melville adds a level of complexity to the story that greatly enhances the number of ways it can be interpreted. As a narrator, the lawyer is unreliable because the reader cannot always trust his interpretation of events. The lawyer, as he himself admits, is a man of "assumptions," and his prejudices often prevent him from offering an accurate view of the situation. This becomes clear early in the story when the lawyer's description of Turkey's unpredictable behavior in the afternoons begs the obvious conclusion that he drinks during his lunch hour. Yet the lawyer is evasive about the matter, perhaps intentionally so Thus, when the lawyer interprets Bartleby's behavior, the reader must decide carefully whether or not the lawyer is accurately perceiving events. The story is full of ironic scenes, among them when the lawyer compliments himself on his deft handling of Bartleby's dismissal after it has become clear to the reader that his efforts have been futile. Some critics argue that the story is really more about the lawyer than about Bartleby. Certainly the narrator's clouded perspective makes it all the more difficult to unlock the mystery of Bartleby's behavior.

Symbolism

The two most significant symbols in "Bartleby the Scrivener" are walls and dead letters. Walls are pervasive in the story. The office is located on Wall Street, and its windows look out onto walls on all sides. Bartleby has a tendency to stare blankly at the wall, lost

in what the lawyer calls "a dead-wall reverie." The walls symbolize Bartleby's psychological imprisonment. Significantly, his fate is to die in prison. Why does Bartleby feel trapped, or "walled off" from society? There are perhaps many answers to this question, but one is suggested by the intriguing symbol of "dead letters" which the lawyer offers at the end of the story. The lawyer believes that the depressing experience of having worked in the United States Dead Letter Office may have affected Bartleby's state of mind. To the lawyer, the "dead letters" represent words of comfort or charity that arrived too late to serve their purpose; as he puts it, "pardon for those who died despairing; hope for those who died unhoping." These symbols of failed communication reflect Bartleby's sense of isolation from society and the failure of the lawyer, or anyone else, to reach him.

Ambiguity

The works of Herman Melville are famous for being deliberately ambiguous, or unclear. Once considered a stylistic flaw, ambiguity is now recognized as a literary device in which the author employs words, symbols, or plot constructions that have two or more distinct meanings. By constructing multiple layers of possible meaning within his story, Melville frustrates those readers who seek an obvious message Typically, Melville forces his readers to consider his characters and events from more than one perspective. For instance, not only is Bartleby's behavior never fully explained, but it is filtered through the distorted perspective of the lawyer, whose own behavior is somewhat mysterious. Moreover, the lawyer's unexpected concluding words, in which he compares the plight of Bartleby to the plight of all humankind, offers another possible meaning to the events that have passed and causes the reader to reevaluate the entire story. The result is a narrative that remains open to many interpretations.

Historical Context

The Triumph of Capitalism

At the time Melville wrote "Bartleby the Scrivener," New York City was firmly entrenched as the financial center of the United States's economy. It had been the nation's leading port during the colonial era, and by the mid-nineteenth century, New York overflowed with banks, credit institutions, insurance companies, brokerage houses, and a thriving stock exchange—all of which put its business community at the forefront of the "organizational revolution" in American economic institutions. By the 1850s, the development of capitalism in New York had matured to the extent that open conflict emerged between wage laborers and capitalists in the form of strikes and street violence. As early as the 1830s, artisans and skilled workers formed trade unions to resist the methods of factory production and wage labor. These craftspeople resented being run out of business by rich capitalists who undercut their trade by selling cheap, mass-produced goods. In addition, wage workers lamented the disappearance of the old relationship between master craftsmen and apprentices. Before the advent of factory production, most skilled workers learned their trade under a master craftsman, who usually took them in and paid for their room, board, and education. This close bond between employer and employee became defunct when machine-oriented factory production eliminated the need for skilled workers, requiring instead a large supply of hourly paid, unskilled laborers. Whereas they had once inhabited the same quarters, now an immense social divide had arisen between laborers and their capitalist employers. New York's merchants and financiers formed the most conspicuous aristocracy of wealth in the country. These businessmen, like the famous John Jacob Astor and Andrew Carnegie, dominated the city's political and social life and became notorious for their opulence. In "Bartleby the Scrivener," Melville's narrator comments wistfully on how the very name John Jacob Astor "rings like unto bullion " Melville's intimate legal office, with its three scriveners (who can be classified as semi-skilled workers), contains elements of both the old and new economic systems.

The Coming of the Civil War

The most pressing political concern of the United States in the 1850s involved the growing conflict between the North and the South, which culminated in 1861 into the Civil War. The Compromise of 1850 had not only failed to settle fundamental disputes over slavery but had worsened them. *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe was published in 1853, one year before "Bartleby the Scrivener" appeared in *Putnam's Magazine*. Stowe's immensely popular novel expressed the deep repulsion that many Northerners felt toward the institution of slavery and implicitly celebrated the "free" society of the North Southern politicians responded to Stowe's attack by condemning what they referred to as the "wage slavery" of the Northern factory system. These Southerners claimed that the condition of a wage laborer was worse than enslavement on a Southern plantation. In debates over slavery, politicians and intellectuals were

often faced with the difficult task of defining the meaning of freedom in America. Melville addressed the theme of freedom vs. slavery in several works, including *Benito Cereno*, "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids," and "Bartleby the Scrivener." Abraham Lincoln suggested that freedom meant the "right to rise and better [one's] conditions in life." By 1856, pitched battles had broken out in Kansas between slaveholders and non-slaveholders, which increased the likelihood of a full-scale civil war. This fate was sealed when a reputed abolitionist, Abraham Lincoln, was elected President in 1860.

Philosophical Trends

In April of 1853, a few months before Melville wrote "Bartleby the Scrivener," the first English translation of the works of German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer appeared in a respected English periodical. Schopenhauer believed that the human will is superior to knowledge. He suggested, however, that the only way for the will to free itself from society and human law is to practice an asceticism that demanded a total withdrawal from society. Schopenhauer imagined that the ideal man destroys life's illusions through inaction Only by gradually extinguishing all connection with the world around him can Schopenhauer's hero perform the supreme act of individual will. It is unknown whether Melville was acquainted with this idea.

Critical Overview

"Bartleby the Scrivener" was first published in *Putnam's Magazine* in the November and December issue of 1853. It was republished three years later in Melville's collection of short stories titled The Piazza Tales. Written during Melville's decline in popularity, "Bartleby the Scrivener" attracted little attention when it first appeared. Since the rebirth of Melville scholarship in the twentieth century, however, this story has become widely considered a great work of short fiction.

Although contemporary critics have been unanimous in their praise of "Bartleby the Scrivener" as a work of genius, there has been little agreement about the meaning of the story. Leo Marx's 1953 article "Melville's Parable of the Wall" argues that the character of Bartleby was autobiographical in nature. In Marx's opinion, Melville saw himself as a nonconformist who preferred not to copy the conventional fiction of his day, much as Bartleby refused to copy legal documents. Alternatively, in his 1962 essay, "Melville's Bartleby as Psychological Double," Mordecai Marcus suggests that the character of Bartleby functions to remind the lawyer of his repressed hatred of his own life. Marcus believes that the story was meant as a devastating criticism of the sterile and monotonous business world inhabited by men like the lawyer, who responds with horror to witnessing his "psychological double" act out his hidden desires.

Many critics of "Bartleby the Scrivener" have attempted to psychoanalyze the title character. Bartleby has been interpreted variously as schizophrenic, neurotic, manic depressive, and autistic. Bartleby has also been compared to Jesus Christ. Donald M. Fiene's 1970 essay "Bartleby the Christ" suggests that Bartleby is a Christ figure because his death results from the lawyer's failure to extend Christian charily to him. In "Dead Letters and Dead Men: Narrative Purpose in 'Bartleby the Scrivener'," (1990) Thomas Mitchell argues that the story is really about the lawyer. Mitchell offers an interpretation that is sympathetic to the lawyer's point of view and suggests that the lawyer ultimately rejects Bartleby's nihilism, or belief in nothing. Finally, David Kuebrich's 1996 article, "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in 'Bartleby'," argues that the story is about class conflict and demonstrates the inhumane attitude of the capitalist class in New York in the 1850s.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Elliot is a Ph.D. student in history at New York University and a former editor of "New England Puritan Literature" for the Cambridge History of American Literature. In the essay that follows, he examines the multiple meanings and interpretations that can be applied to the title character of "Bartleby the Scrivener."

Almost one hundred and fifty years since it was first published, Herman Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener" remains one of the most elusive short stories in all of American literature. What is the reason for Bartleby's strange behavior in the story? This is the question that plagues the story's narrator, and it has plagued the readers of "Bartleby the Scrivener" as well. While many intriguing hypotheses have been offered over the years, no single interpretation dominates critical opinion or seems to fully explain the author's intention. Indeed, part of "Bartleby's" enduring appeal comes from its well-crafted ambiguity and denial of easy interpretation. Such an enigmatic story by one of America's greatest writers has proved an irresistible challenge to scholars in numerous fields, including literature, history, philosophy, psychology, and religion. These various approaches to "Bartleby" have deepened our understanding of the issues in the story, even if they have not solved the riddle of Bartleby's behavior. Perhaps to understand the story one must first accept that there is no single meaning to the character of Bartleby. This essay will consider Bartleby's actions in light of the possibility that his ultimate meaning is not meant to be understood by the reader.

Let us briefly examine one of the most influential interpretations of "Bartleby the Scrivener." In a 1953 essay Leo Marx argued that the character of Bartleby symbolically represents Melville himself, who resisted the pressure to write the kind of unoriginal, formulaic fiction that could provide him with a comfortable living. Marx believed that "Bartleby" was Melville's testament to the misunderstood artist who refuses to "copy" popular forms—as Bartleby refused to copy legal documents—and who suffers rejection and alienation from society on account of his independence. It is tempting to interpret the story in this fashion because, undoubtedly, Melville was something of a Bartleby. Throughout his life, Melville felt himself an outcast from society and looked askance at America's self-confident republic. His innocence was shaken by his father's financial ruin and early death, which led to Melville's years of aimlessness as a sailor. Even after he obtained a good reputation and a steady income as a writer, Melville remained unfulfilled. He constantly challenged his readers with difficult works that betrayed an unpopular degree of pessimism about the state of humanity. Melville refused to change his message despite the consequences, as he complained to author Nathaniel Hawthorne: "Dollars damn me___What I feel most moved to write, that is banned—it will not pay. Yet... write the other way I cannot." Or, as Marx would have it, Melville would *prefer* not.

Like many who have interpreted "Bartleby," Marx sheds some important light on the story, but he does not explain enough. Unlike Melville's, Bartleby's resistance is entirely passive. Bartleby takes no action and offers no overt criticism of society or even a reason for his actions. Bartleby cannot communicate his ideas or feelings in any form

except the inadequate statement, "I prefer not to." Bartleby's strange unwillingness to articulate his feelings casts serious doubt on the argument that he represents the uncompromising artist. Bartleby is described as eerily "mechanical" and "inhuman." Unlike Bartleby, Melville never became mentally or socially paralyzed. Moreover, his feelings of pessimism about society never reached the tragic depths that appear to affect Bartleby. The effort it took to create Melville's works of fiction demonstrate that he must have had at least a glimmer of hope that they could somehow make a difference to the world. Bartleby's alienation seems somewhat greater and more universal than Melville's, yet his silence ensures that the meaning of his resistance will remain ambiguous to the end. Considering Melville's ability as a writer, it is fair to say that the difficulties presented by the character of Bartleby are there for a reason. Why did Melville create this inscrutable character? Some clues can be gathered from a recognition of Melville's own philosophical angst and his use of symbolism.

Bartleby functions in the story not as a character but as a symbol. It may be useful to compare Bartleby the symbol to another highly ambiguous creation of Melville's imagination—*Moby Dick* Of all of Melville's characters, only the white whale, Moby Dick, presents the same interpretive difficulties as Bartleby and has been construed in as many different ways. In the novel Moby Dick, each of Melville's characters interprets the white whale differently, and its ultimate meaning seems both awesome and unknowable. The inscrutability of the white whale reflects Melville's own skepticism about the inability of human beings to fully comprehend and control the forces in the universe at a time when faith in science and human reason were rarely questioned. Ahab, who accepts no limits on man's ability to know, sums up the white whale's elusive meaning when he explains his hatred of the whale: "How can a prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there is naught beyond. But 'tis enough.... That inscrutable thing is chiefly what I hate; and be that white whale agent, or be that white whale principal, I will wreak that hate upon him." It is significant that Ahab compares Moby Dick to a wall. Ahab desires to know the ultimate meaning of all things, but he is frustrated because he cannot penetrate beyond the surfaces of the tangible world. For Ahab, existence in this world is but a prison because he cannot know, and sometimes doubts, that any deeper meaning exists. Thus, all that is left to Ahab is to attack and destroy the inscrutable surfaces which he has personified in the white whale.

In "Bartleby the Scrivener," Melville explores similar philosophical issues in a different kind of setting. In a striking parallel with Ahab, Bartleby is also transfixed by walls, a pervasive symbol in the story. The office is located on Wall Street, and its windows look out onto walls on all sides. Bartleby has a tendency to stare blankly at the wall, lost in what the lawyer calls "a dead-wall reverie," and his fate is to eventually die in prison, his face turned to the wall. It could be argued that, like Ahab, the walls symbolize Bartleby's sense of imprisonment within the limits of human knowledge, but we can never know this for sure. Like Moby Dick, Bartleby himself is also a kind of wall. To others he presents an inscrutable facade beyond which ultimate meaning is unknown. Bartleby, in fact, assumes the same symbolic function as Moby Dick, and the drama unfolds in the narration of the lawyer, who tries to comprehend him. No grand egotist like Ahab, the lawyer confronts the inscrutable Bartleby from the perspective of a typical genteel

American whose comfortable existence has given him no reason for philosophical angst. As Bartleby's behavior causes his ordinary world of routine and unshaken "assumptions" to collapse, the lawyer is forced to confront issues about the human condition from which he had been previously sheltered.

All the reader knows about Bartleby is learned through the point of view of the lawyer. Thus, it may be worth considering that what Bartleby "really means" is not as important as what he means to the lawyer. At first, the lawyer is miffed at Bartleby's refusal to proofread documents, and he attempts to make him aware of the traditional practices and "common usages" of the office. Throughout the story, the lawyer continually attempts to explain Bartleby's behavior within a rational framework. The lawyer supposes in turn that Bartleby does not understand the rules of the office; Bartleby's resistance is just a minor eccentricity that can be controlled like Turkey's and Nipper's; Bartleby ails physically from a poor diet or bad light; and, finally, Bartleby has been deeply affected by a previous job experience. None of his explanations are satisfactory, however. The lawyer himself reacts with growing horror and confusion as the seriousness of the problem becomes clear, especially when considering Bartleby's total solitude. At this point, it becomes evident that Bartleby' s behavior has begun to take on deeper symbolic significance for the lawyer. "How can a person exist without communication with others?" he wonders when he realizes that Bartleby neither converses with other people nor reads. "Is it possible to be so utterly alone in the universe?" Bartleby's actions and demeanor suggest to the lawyer, perhaps for the first time, that existence has no meaning or purpose and it is possible that we live in a cold and indifferent universe.

Once the lawyer has contemplated the meaning of Bartleby, he begins to make an effort to dispel the mystery and establish some human connection that will restore confidence in his optimistic view of life. He begins by trying to discover something about Bartleby's past, assuring Bartleby that he "feels friendly" towards him. This fails, but later in the story the lawyer tries again to reach Bartleby when he points out that life offers him choices and questions him as to what he would "prefer" to do with his life. Yet this tactic also fails, as Bartleby refuses to differentiate between the "choices" he is offered, saying with indifference that he is not particular. Finally, the lawyer offers to take Bartleby in and care for him. Again, this offer of kindness and human sympathy fails to impress Bartleby, who would rather remain in the doorway. In these scenes a conflict emerges between the lawyer's optimistic and reassuring view of die universe and what he perceives as Bartleby's nihilism. The fact that the lawyer perceives a profound meaninglessness and existential despair in Bartleby's actions may suggest that buried deep within his own optimistic and superficial world view there exists (at least) a lingering doubt.

Many critics have regarded Melville's lawyer as a buffoonish parody of the Amencan middle class. Yet if the philosophical conflict between the lawyer and Bartleby is taken seriously, then one must reconsider whether Melville really views his lawyer with contempt. Melville, as I have argued, never totally succumbed to his pessimism, as Bartleby seems to. Is there something of value, then, in the lawyer's critique of Bartleby? In one of the most significant passages in the story, the lawyer visits Bartleby

at the prison. He finds Bartleby standing alone in the prison courtyard, staring intently at the stone wall. The lawyer attempts to tear Bartleby's attention from the wall, stating, "see, it is not so sad a place as one might think. Look, there is the sky, and here is the grass." Without looking, Bartleby responds, "I know where I am." The contrast between their value systems is made clear: even if it is true that the human condition is a prison, the lawyer will optimistically focus his attention on the sky and the grass, while all Bartleby can think of are the walls that shut him in. Unable to accept what he perceives as Bartleby's point of view, the lawyer eventually decides that Bartleby must have been adversely affected by an experience which forced him to constantly contemplate the hopelessness and sad ironies of life. By "assorting for the flames" those dead letters which lawyer imagines would bring "hope to the unhoping" and comfort for the "despairing," Bartleby somehow lost faith. This conclusion suggests that the lawyer will carry on believing in something, however superficial, despite his contact with Bartleby.

In Bartleby Melville created a highly ambiguous symbol that cannot be reduced to a single meaning or interpretation. Melville thus places the reader in much the same position as the lawyer in the story. It is somewhat ironic that most critics of the story have dismissed the lawyer's interpretation of Bartleby as inaccurate while advancing their own as correct. It may be that the lawyer's interpretation is the only one that matters. When confronted with an experience that shakes his comfortable world view, the lawyer becomes anxious and fearful but finally regards Bartleby sentimentally as a fellow "son of Adam" who has mysteriously lost his way. It is not unlikely that Melville had some sympathy for the lawyer's resolution of the matter. By finally leaving questions of ultimate meaning unresolved, the lawyer restores his own faith through a simple expression of empathy for Bartleby's suffering. It is not philosophically profound, but it is undeniably human.

Source: Mark Elliott, "An Overview of 'Bartleby the Scrivener'," in *Short Stones for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

In the following excerpt, Gupta concludes that it was Melville's intention in "Bartleby the Scrivener " to show the limits of reason and to emphasize the importance of imagination and intuition.

"Say now, that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable' - say so, Bartleby "

"At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable," was his mildly cadaverous reply.

The unnamed narrator of "Bartleby" is an apostle of reason. His outlook on life is clear, unambiguous, and uncluttered by mysticism or imagination. Reason and common sense are his deities, and he looks upon them as infallible guides to human conduct.

All goes well with the narrator until he decides to engage as his new scrivener an inscrutable and "motionless" young man named Bartleby. For two days, Bartleby diligently does "an extraordinary quantity of writing." But on the third day, when the narrator calls him to compare a copy sheet, Bartleby, "in a singularly mild, firm voice," replies: "I would prefer not to." The narrator is stunned by what he considers to be the unreasonableness of Bartleby's conduct and briefly argues with him But Bartleby remains unmoved.

A few days later, the narrator again solicits Bartleby's help, and Bartleby again replies: "I would prefer not to." This time, the narrator is so amazed at Bartleby's intransigence that for a few moments he is "turned into a pillar of salt." The first thing he does on recovering his composure is to ask the "reason" for it: "Why do you refuse?" (italics Melville's). When Bartleby simply repeats the refrain: "I would prefer not to," the narrator begins to "reason with him." His appeal is to "common usage and common sense." But even this appeal goes unheeded and Bartleby tells him that his decision - or shall I say preference - is irreversible. This greatly upsets the narrator, particularly because Bartleby's refusal is "unprecedented" and "unreasonable."

Several days pass. But Bartleby shows no sign of relenting, and continues in Ms course of passive resistance. Again and again, the narrator asks him to do something "perfectly reasonable," and again and again his only reply is: "I would prefer not to." The narrator is not so much annoyed at the inconvenience that Bartleby's conduct causes him as he is flabbergasted by its "perverseness" and "unreasonableness." He has spent his whole life shutting out whatever is unpleasant or inconvenient. His mind has, therefore, fallen into a groove it cannot easily get out of. Bartleby's advent, however, creates a situation with which he can cope effectively only if he can break out of his routine and think in unaccustomed ways. Since nothing in his life and experience has prepared him for such an eventuality, he feels helpless and lost. The story dramatizes how tragically the narrator fails to deal with Bartleby in an effective manner and how Bartleby's steady and compulsive refusal gradually undermines the norms by which he has lived so far.

In course of time, the narrator becomes sufficiently interested in Bartleby to want to know the details of his life and the source of his malady. But even here he is frustrated, and Bartleby prefers not to tell him anything about himself. The narrator is now completely nonplussed: what "reasonable objection," he wonders, can Bartleby have to speak to him. After all, he feels "friendly" towards him Even now, he clings tenaciously, although somewhat precariously, to his hope that given time, Bartleby may be brought round to see reason, and in a highly significant scene, he addresses Bartleby thus:

"Bartleby, never mind, then, about revealing your history, but let me entreat you, as a friend, to comply as far as may be with the usages of this office Say now you will help to examine papers to-morrow or next day. in short, say now that in a day or two you will begin to be a little reasonable - say so, Bartleby."

"At present I would prefer not to be a little reasonable," was his mildly cadaverous reply.

Critics have shown great ingenuity trying to determine the cause of Bartleby's malady. But to look for a rational explanation of Bartleby's conduct is to repeat the narrator's mistake and to miss the whole point of the story. The most significant aspect of Bartleby's behavior is that it is not only unexplained but also inexplicable, and that it is therefore futile to invoke reason and common sense in dealing with it or in trying to understand it. Melville carefully refrains from identifying the source of Bartleby's problem, because Bartleby's very irrationality is the point of his story. In "Bartleby" Melville clearly suggests what is confirmed by modern psychology: that men are not primarily creatures of reason, but are controlled by dimly perceived instinctual drives and obscure impulsions, and that this being so, one needs much more than reason and common sense to deal effectively with human problems.

Herein, I think, lies the failure - or should we call it the limitation of the narrator. He pitches reason's claims exceptionally high and over-estimates the range of the results that can be achieved by an exclusive reliance on it. He has too much confidence in the efficacy of intellectual processes. Unaware of the merits of unreflecting spontaneity, he has committed himself to the slow pace, the qualifications and hedging of rational thought. For a long tune, critics have debated what the narrator could or should have done, and some have gone to the extent of showing annoyance with Bartleby and considerable respect for the narrator. That the narrator is benevolent and well-intentioned is undoubtedly true, but it is also completely irrelevant. What is relevant is his flatulence and evasion, and his application of only compromises and half-measures to what is an extreme malady - "innate and incurable disorder" as he himself calls it. But the "disorder" is "incurable" only in terms of the palliatives that the narrator, with his limited vision, can think of. Because he has boundless faith in the efficacy of unaided reason as an instrument of action, he is totally helpless when exposed to a reason-defying situation. When faced with Bartleby's unreasonable willfulness, the best that he can do is to try to reason him out of it through appeals to tradition, authority, and common usage.... But the situation calls for more than reason; it calls for intuition and imagination, which the narrator has eschewed all his life. Henri Bergson remarks that the surest way to attain the truth is by perception and intuition, by reasoning to a certain point, then by taking a "mortal leap." The narrator, however, can go only so far as

reason takes him. Not being gifted with imagination and intuition, he is incapable of taking the "mortal leap" that might have enabled him to cope with his problem successfully.

From the standpoint of conventional morality, of course, no guilt attaches to the narrator. His guilt, as Maurice Friedman points out [in his "'Bartleby' and the Modern Exile"], is "existential guilt," the guilt of "human existence itself, the guilt that every man feels when his responsibility for another is unlimited while his resources are limited." He is, to be sure, more tolerant than most people would have been in his situation, and he was constitutionally incapable of the kind of sympathy that was required. But the narrator in "Bartleby" is not judged from the viewpoint of conventional morality. He is judged from the viewpoint of idealistic Christian morality, from standards which, to use Plotinus Plirdimmon's phrase in Pierre, are "chronometrical" rather than "horological." The attorney in Murray's ["'Bartleby and I"] complains thus:

But my profoundest, all-embracing grievance comes from an uneasy feeling, or suspicion, that Mr Melville was out to flog me with the Sermon on the Mount, as if to say, you should have given the full measure of your love to Bartleby, all of it, every atom's atom of it, without reservations, qualifications, or reflections as to the consequences of so selfless a commitment of compassion. You should have sacrificed your profession, deserted your clients, set aside your duties to the High Court of Chancery, and taken Bartleby to live with you at home. Is not the author implying this and nothing less? If he is, I'd like to ask, what right has he to judge me from that unearthly and inhuman pinnacle of ethics?

The narrator's morality, however, is firmly rooted in expediency, and his self-interest tends to supplant altruistic considerations. Even his kindness is not entirely a product of compassion but is often motivated by prudence. When faced with spiritual crises, he responds with his usual stance of reason and common sense, a stance admirably suited to his own utilitarian world, but hopelessly ineffectual in relation to Bartleby's situation. As an apostle of reason, he so desperately seeks rational explanations for Bartleby's conduct that he is driven to read "Edwards on the Will" and "Priestley on Necessity" in the vain hope that these writers might shed light on it. The rumored explanation of Bartleby's conduct that he offers in the epilogue is again an attempt on his part to account in a tidy and rational manner, for what is essentially above and beyond reason. Even after having undergone the experience, the narrator has not understood its full purport Although he has had glimpses into hitherto unexplored aspects of life, he has not assimilated his experience fully. In fact, he is still bewildered by it, and his recounting of the experience might well be the result of his compulsive need to rationalize it, and thus to exorcise it out of his system where it has for long festered as a sore, upsetting his precise and measured ways of life.

In the final analysis then, the story focuses on the narrator's failure of perception and judgment. His unswerving faith in reason and common sense renders him unfit for dealing effectively with Bartleby's situation. He tries to cure Bartleby's spiritual paralysis by tentative acts of charity, and fails to realize that Bartleby's problem could not be fathomed by logic but only by imaginative understanding. He is thus one of those

mundane men who reduce everything to what Carlyle's Teufelsdrockh calls "Attorney-Logic." Spiritual insight is not granted to such as he. Ministering utilitarian solutions to spiritual problems, he becomes what Teufelsdrockh calls a "sandblind pedant":

whoso recognizes the unfathomable, all-pervading domain of Mystery, which is everywhere under out feet and among our hands; to whom the Universe is an Oracle and Temple, as well as a Kitchen and Cattle stall, - he shall be a delirious Mystic, to him thou with sniffing charity, wilt protrusively proffer thy handlamp, and shriek, as one injured, when he kicks his foot through it - *Armer Teufel* ... Retire into private places with thy foolish cackle, or what were better, give it up, and weep, not that thy reign of wonder is done, and God's world all disembellished and prosaic, but that thou hitherto art a Dilettante and sandblind pedant.

Thus in "Bartleby" Melville brings out the limits of reason as a guide to human conduct and as a controlling factor in human behavior and stresses the need for understanding and imagination. He shows in unmistakable terms that intellectual and analytical processes are not the most decisive determinants of the beliefs and conduct of men, and that human behavior, therefore, cannot be fully grasped by reason but only by imagination. Although Melville did not share the Transcendentalist belief in the supremacy and infallibility of intuition, he recognized its need and its value in establishing meaningful human relationships. The need for human interdependence is, after all, a recurrent theme in Melville's fiction, and in "Bartleby" Melville shows a full awareness of how lack of insight and intuition and an exclusive reliance on reason can block channels of communication. No wonder, then, that the story should seem teasingly modern in rhythm, idiom, and controlling vision, and that critics should seek - and find - its analogues, not in Melville's contemporaries, but in such Russian masters as Gogol, Goncharov, and Dostoievsky, and in the modern existentialists such as Sartre, Camus, and Kafka.

Source: R. K Gupta, "'Bartleby' Melville's Critique of Reason," in *Indian Journal of American Studies*, Vol. 4, Nos. 1-2, June and December, 1974, pp. 66-71.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Marcus argues that Bartleby is a psychological double for the lawyer-narrator of "Bartleby the Scrivener."

Most interpreters of Melville's haunting story "Bartleby the Scrivener" (1853) have seen it as a somewhat allegorical comment on Melville's plight as a writer after the publication of Moby-Dick and Pierre. Others have suggested that the story dramatizes the conflict between absolutism and free will in its protagonist, that it shows the destructive power of irrationality or that it criticizes the sterility and impersonality of a business society. The last of these interpretations seems to me the most accurate, and the others suffer either from an inability to adjust the parts of the story to Melville's experience (or that of any serious writer), or to adjust the parts to one another.

I believe that the character of Bartleby is a psychological double for the story's nameless lawyer-narrator, and that the story's criticism of a sterile and impersonal society can best be clarified by investigation of this role. Melville's use of psychological doubles in *Mardi, Moby-Dick, and Pierre* has been widely and convincingly discussed. Probably Melville's most effective double is Fedallah, Ahab's shadowy, compulsive, and despairing counterpart. Bartleby's role and significance as a double remain less evident than Fedallah's, for the lawyer is less clearly a divided person than is Ahab, and Bartleby's role as double involves a complex ambiguity. Bartleby appears to the lawyer chiefly to remind him of the inadequacies, the sterile routine, of his world.

Evidence that Bartleby is a psychological double for the lawyer-narrator is diffused throughout the story, in details about Bartleby and in the lawyer's obsessive concern with and for Bartleby. The fact that Bartleby has no history, as we learn at the beginning of the story and in a later dialogue, suggests that he has emerged from the lawyer's mind. He never leaves the lawyer's offices and he subsists on virtually nothing. After he refuses to work any longer, he becomes a kind of parasite on the lawyer, but the exact nature of his dependence on the lawyer remains mysteriously vague. His persistent refusal to leave despite all inducements and threats implies that he cannot leave, mat it is his role in life not to leave the lawyer's establishment. Bartleby's compulsive way of life, calm determination, and otherwise inexplicable tenacity suggest that he is an embodiment of the kind of perverse determination we might expect to flower in the rather gentle and humane lawyer should he give over to an unyielding passivity as a protest against his way of life.

The behavior of the lawyer gives stronger evidence that Bartleby is his psychological double. The screen which the lawyer places around Bartleby's desk to "isolate Bartleby from my sight, though not remove him from my voice" so that "privacy and society were conjoined" symbolizes the lawyer's compartmentalization of the unconscious forces which Bartleby represents. Nevertheless, Bartleby's power over the lawyer quickly grows as the story progresses, and it grows at least partially in proportion to Bartleby's increasingly infuriating behavior. Towards the beginning of the story the lawyer feels vaguely that "all the justice and all the reason" may lie with Bartleby's astonishing

refusal to check his copy. Later the lawyer confesses to being "almost sorry for ray brilliant success" when he thinks he has succeeded in evicting the now wholly passive Bartleby; and when he finds that he is mistaken, he admits that Bartleby has a "wondrous ascendancy" over him. Growing used to Bartleby's amazing tenacity, he feels that Bartleby has been "billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence," and he muses about Bartleby: "I never feel so private as when I know you are here."

The lawyer finally accepts Bartleby's presence as a natural part of his world, and he admits that without outside interference their strange relationship might have continued indefinitely. But the crisis of the story arrives when his professional friends criticize him for harboring Bartleby and thus lead him to his various struggles to be rid of him. The professional friends represent the rationality of the "normal" social world, an external force which recalls the lawyer from his tentative acceptance of the voice of apparent unreason represented by Bartleby. When he finally resorts to moving out of his offices in order to leave Bartleby behind, he declares "Strange to say - I tore myself from him whom I had so longed to be rid of."

The lawyer's intermittently vindictive responses to Bartleby's passivity, which are combined with acceptance of and submission to Bartleby, suggest an anger against a force which has invaded himself. The last action which suggests identification of the two occurs when in the prison yard Bartleby behaves as if the lawyer is responsible for his imprisonment and perhaps for his hopeless human situation as well.

Bartleby's role as a psychological double is to criticize the sterility, impersonality, and mechanical adjustments of the world which the lawyer inhabits. The setting on Wall Street indicates that the characters are in a kind of prison, walled off from the world. The lawyer's position as Master of Chancery suggests the endless routine of courts of equity and the difficulty of finding equity in life. The lawyer's easygoing detachment - he calls himself an "eminently safe man" - represents an attempt at a calm adjustment to the Wall Street world, an adjustment which is threatened by Bartleby's implicit, and also calm, criticism of its endless and sterile routine. Although the humaneness of the lawyer may weaken his symbolic role as a man of Wall Street, it does make him a person to whom the unconscious insights represented by Bartleby might arrive, and who would sympathize with and almost, in a limited sense, yield to Bartleby.

The frustrating sterility and monotony of the world which Bartleby enters is further shown in the portraits of the lawyer's two eccentric scriveners, Turkey and Nippers. These men display grotesque adjustments to and comically eccentric protests against the Wall Street world. Both of them are frustrated by their existences. Turkey spends most of his money for liquor, imbibing heavily at lunch-time, presumably to induce a false blaze of life which will help him to endure but which makes him useless for work during each afternoon. Nippers, on the other hand, needs no artificial stimulant; he possesses a crude radiance of his own, and in the mornings is "charged... with an irritable brandy-like disposition," but at this time of day his work is poor. Nippers can get through life in the office only with the aid of endless re-adjustments of his writing table; no matter how he places it, he is still uncomfortable. Both of these men. are least

serviceable when they are, in a sense, most alive. Turkey and Nippers combine automaton behavior, self-narcosis, and awkward attempts to preserve their individuality.

Entering this world of mildly smug self-satisfaction and mechanical behavior, Bartleby begins his work eagerly, "as if long famishing for something to copy." This action probably represents both a hunger for life and a desperate attempt to deaden his sensibilities among such sterile surroundings. Very soon, however, Bartleby evinces the first of his many refusals: he will not help to verify his copy against the original. Apparently Bartleby is willing to act within the lawyer's world, but he refuses all personal contact because it is spurious. His refusal is paradoxical, for he rejects the illusion of personality in an impersonal world by retreating to another kind of impersonality which alone makes that world endurable. His insistence that he "prefers not" to conform reflects both his gentleness and the profundity of his rejection of impersonality masking itself as personal contact As such, it appropriately represents a voice deep within the lawyer himself, a desire to give up his way of life. As the story progresses, Bartleby rejects all activity and refuses to leave; he has discovered that impersonality is not enough to help him endure this world Bartleby clings to the lawyer because he represents a continuing protest within the lawyer's mind, whom he makes "stagger in his own plainest faith"

As Bartleby's passivity picks up momentum, he moves from the impersonality of copying to the impersonality of contemplating the dead, blind wall which fronts the window near his desk. This wall, and the prison walls "of amazing thickness" at the base of which Bartleby finally lies dead, parallel the images of the whale as "that wall shoved near to me" (Chapter 36) and of the whale's head as a "dead, blind wall" (Chapters 76 and 125) in Moby-Dick. Noting this parallel [in his "Melville's Parable of the Walls"], Leo Marx takes these images to represent the wall of death. I believe, however, that in both story and novel, they represent chiefly the terror and implacability of existence, against which Ahab actively and Bartleby passively revolt. Both men suggest that, in Ahab's words, "The dead, blind wall butts all inquiring heads at last" (Chapter 125). The wall may also symbolize those limitations which give every individual his personal identity, for Ahab' s unwillingness to accept his limitations as a suffering man motivates his vindictive drive to pierce the wall.

The parallel between another image in "Bartleby" and a significant symbol in *Moby-Dick* adds to the likelihood that Bartleby represents a force in the lawyer's unconscious mind: Bartleby, "like the last column of some ruined temple ... remained standing mute and solitary in the middle of the otherwise deserted room." This passage resembles a series of remarkable images which symbolize the unconscious part of Ahab: "those vast Roman halls of Themes," where man's "awful essence sits ... like a Caryatid... upholding on his frozen brow the piled entablature of ages" (Chapter 41).

The wall in "Bartleby" symbolizes the human condition in the society within which Bartleby feels trapped, and by extension the burden of his own identity within the limitations of such a society. The lawyer's establishment on Wall Street, and the wall which is ten feet from his window (Bartleby's is three feet from Ms), suggest his slighter awareness of his trapped human condition. When at the end Bartleby lies dead within

the prison walls "of amazing thickness," he has succumbed to the impersonality of his society and to his inability to resist it actively. His assuming the fetal position in death, "his knees drawn up, and lying on his side, his head touching the cold stones," suggesting a passive retreat to the womb, seems the opposite of Ahab's desire to be a superman who will pierce the wall of limitations and identity.

However, the symbol of the prison walls is complicated by the appearance within them of a green turf and by the lawyer's exclamation to Bartleby, within the prison, "There is the sky, and here is the grass." These images of grass symbolize the creative possibilities of life. Bartleby's response to the lawyer's declaration is, "I know where I am," which is an accusation that the lawyer is responsible for Bartleby's incarceration in the prison of the world The lawyer's sensitivity to both the validity of Bartleby's general protest and to the creative possibilities which it neglects indicates, I believe, that Bartleby represents a protest within the lawyer which has at least partially taken the form of a death drive. Parallel to this paradox is the fact that Bartleby's protest also resembles the protests of Turkey and Nippers, who combine self-effacement, self-assertion, and self-narcosis.

The concluding section of the story in which the lawyer seeks for a rational explanation of Bartleby's actions by reporting a rumor that he had worked in the dead letter office in Washington and so had become obsessed with human loneliness seems to me an artificial conclusion tacked on as a concession to popular taste. The lawyer's otherwise final statement that Bartleby lies asleep "with kings and counselors" is probably the story's authentic conclusion, for - despite the hopelessness of Bartleby's position - it attributes profundity and dignity to Bartleby's protest against the sterility of a spiritless society.

Melville, however, appears to intend further metaphysical speculation. The embodiment of a protest against sterility and impersonality in the passive and finally death-seeking Bartleby may suggest that man is hopelessly trapped by the human condition in an acquisitive society. Thus the lawyer may feel wisdom in Bartleby's final resignation as well as in his protest. The situation, however, is complicated by the likelihood that Bartleby appears as a protest within the lawyer's mind against his way of life, but this protest leads to death, and only the lawyer perceives the creative possibilities that Bartleby ignores.

I do not believe, however, that Melville was suggesting that the lawyer's way of life contained promises of creativity which Bartleby could not see. Rather he was suggesting the negative course which impulses represented by Bartleby might take, particularly when they emerge in a rather thoroughly sterile environment. Thus the story lacks a thematic resolution. Its conclusion creates not so much a counter-criticism of Bartleby's passivity as an expression of quiet despair about the human predicament. The lawyer is not visibly changed after a straggle with his double, as are Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov or Conrad's young sea captain in "The Secret Sharer." Neither does he succumb to an intense and destructive despair, although Bartleby has partially represented a subliminal death drive within him. However, the standstill to which the

lawyer's insights have brought him does show Melville's imagination moving in the direction of the intense despair found in much contemporary literature.

Source: Mordecai Marcus, "Melville's Bartleby as Psychological Double," in *College English*, Vol 23, No 5, February, 1962, pp 365-68.

Adaptations

Bartleby is a 1970 film adaptation of Melville's story starring Paul Scofield, John McEnery, Thorly Walters, and Colin Jeavons, and directed by Anthony Friedman. The film was produced by Pantheon, distributed by British Lion, and is 78 minutes.

The film *A Discussion of Herman Melville's Bartleby* was produced by Encyclopaedia Britannica Educational Corp. in 1969, and accompanies the film *Bartleby by Herman Melville*, produced by the company that same year.

Bartleby, a motion picture by Audio-Visual Services, 1962, is also based on Melville's story.

Bartleby the Scrivener is available on audio-cassette read by Milton R. Stern as part of the Everett Edwards 1971 series, 19th-century American Writers. 39 minutes

A filmstrip and cassette of *Bartleby the Scrivener* was produced by Prentice-Hall Media in 1977.

Topics for Further Study

Because of Bartleby's obvious maladjustment to society, many critics have used the character as a case study for psychoanalysis. How would you diagnose Bartleby's behavior? How would you diagnose the behavior of the lawyer?

Investigate the social conditions of New York City during the 1850s. How did class conflict play a role in the day-to-day life of most New Yorkers? What were conditions like for office workers on Wall Street?

Melville is considered by many to be a deeply philosophical novelist. Using the story of "Bartleby the Scrivener," examine Melville's attitude toward one of the following philosophical movements: the Enlightenment, transcendentalism, Romanticism, idealism, nihilism.

Research attitudes about conformity in American business life by relying on sociological studies or literary works. How have such attitudes changed over time?

Compare and Contrast

1850s: Conflicts between labor and management are not uncommon The U.S. economy is growing rapidly, largely at the expense of unskilled and semi-skilled laborers. Unions are beginning to form on the national level. Local unions also gain more power and represent workers from a variety of crafts and trades. During this period of development, labor organizers begin to make distinctions between skilled and unskilled workers.

1990s: Though not as powerful as they were in previous decades, labor unions continue to exert their power in order to improve working conditions and wages for their members. In 1997, United Parcel Service (UPS) goes on strike and cripples many other industries that rely on UPS for delivery of their products. Teamsters President Ron Carey describes the stake's settlement as "a victory over corporate greed."

1850s: The narrator states that Ginger Nut, the office boy, earns one dollar a week. Wages during this time are quite low. In 1860, the average farmer makes 88 cents per day and works 66 hours a week.

1990s: While the position of law copyist held by Bartleby, Turkey, and Nippers no longer exists, similar modern professions include legal secretaries and paralegals. A legal secretary helps prepare legal documents for lawyers and earns between $16,400 and $36,000 a year. Paralegals do much of the background work for lawyers, including legal research, and earn between $14,000 and $39,000 a year.

What Do I Read Next?

Nathaniel Hawthorne's short story "The Celestial Railroad" (1843) is a nineteenth-century retelling of John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Hawthorne parodies Americans' self-confident belief in progress without moral consequences. Hawthorne's work had a significant influence on Herman Melville and dealt with many similar themes.

Melville's 1855 story "The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids" takes another look at the social effects of capitalism, emphasizing shifting gender roles. Melville's repulsion toward the New England paper factories is explicit, and his descriptions of dehumanized factory workers can be compared to his descriptions of Bartleby.

Tom Wolfe's 1987 novel *Bonfire of the Vanities* concerns greed and moral corruption on Wall Street in the prosperous 1980s. In recounting the protagonist's downfall, Wolfe examines the class structure and justice system of New York City.

Melville's 1857 novel *The Confidence-Man: His Masquerade* explores the psychological and philosophical aspects of human relations in a heterogeneous, capitalist society. Like "Bartleby," this highly experimental work presents numerous difficulties to the reader but remains a powerful meditation on American society in the 1850s.

Karen Halttunen's historical study *Confidence Men and Painted Women: A Study of Middle-Class Culture in America*, 1830-1870 examines the fears of middle-class Americans about the dangers of a capitalist society. Using Melville's "Confidence-Man" as her central model, Halttunen shows how American attitudes toward honesty and deception have changed over time.

See especially her chapter "The Confidence-Man in Corporate America" for an interpretation of American business culture.

David Riesman, Nathan Glazer, and Reuel Denny' s The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character (1950) is a sociological study of the complex relationship between economics and personality development. This work traces the "dominant personality types" that have corresponded to the three major phases of American economic history. The issue of conformity vs. character development in business life is central to their analysis of American history.

In his prize-winning study *Chants Democratic: New York City and the Rise of the American Working Class, 1788-1850* (1984), Sean Wilentz traces the rise of capitalism and the creation of an industrial working class in New York City. He examines of the role of working-class radicals and their resistance to the capitalist system in the early years of the Industrial Revolution.

"The Beast in the Jungle," a 1903 story by American writer Henry James, provides an interesting comparison to Melville's literary techniques in "Bartleby the Scrivener." The

story presents a psychological drama from the viewpoint of an unusually unreliable narrator who attempts to interpret the actions of those around him.

* 'The Secret Sharer"(1909) by Joseph Conrad is the story of a sea captain who harbors a possibly murderous stowaway on his ship. The story concerns the theme of the "doppelganger," or psychological double, that some critics have suggested is evident in Melville's work.

Further Study

Fisher, Marvin "'Bartleby,' Melville's Circumscribed Scrivener," *The Southern Review*, Vol. X, No. 1, Winter, 1974, pp 59-79.

Fisher surveys several critical interpretations of "Bartleby" and concludes that Bartleby is intended to represent humankind generally.

Kaplan, Morton, and Kloss, Robert "Fantasy of Passivity. Melville's 'Bartleby the Scrivener'," in *The Unspoken Motive: A Guide to Psycho-analytic Literary Criticism*, Free Press, 1973, pp 63-79.

This article diagnoses Bartleby as a manic depressive and insists that the lawyer's passivity is a neurotic attempt to repress aggressive and violent impulses.

Kuebnch, David. "Melville's Doctrine of Assumptions: The Hidden Ideology of Capitalist Production in 'Bartleby,'"

The New England Quarterly, Vol LXK,No. 3, September, 1996, pp. 381-405.

This article argues that "Bartleby" is about class conflict and demonstrates the false ideology of the capitalist class in New York in the 1850s

Morgan, Winifred. "Bartleby and the Failure of Conventional Virtue," in *Renascence*, Vol. LXTX, No. 3, September, 1996, pp. 381-405.

A long essay that concentrates on how Bartleby's actions reveal the psychological composition of his boss.

Perry, Dennis R. "'Ah, Humanity': Compulsion Neuroses in Melville's 'Bartleby'," *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol. 24, No 4, Fall, 1987, pp 407-15.

Perry contends that the character of Bartleby suffers from neuroses because he cannot deal with the social conventions of Wall Street

A review of The Piazza Tales, in the *New York Tribune*, June 23, 1856. Reprinted in Melville- The Critical Heritage, edited by Watson G. Branch, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974, p. 357.

Brief review that offers some favorable comments about "Bartleby."

Stempel, Daniel, and Stillians, Bruce M. "*Bartleby the Scrivener': A Parable of Pessimism," in Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol 27, No 1,1972-1973, pp 268-82. This article demonstrates the parallels with, and possible influence of, Schopenhauer's philosophy in "Bartleby "

Bibliography

Marx, Leo. "Melville's Parable of the Wall," *The Sewanee Review*, Vol LXI, No. 4, Autumn, 1953, pp. 102-27.

Mitchell, Thomas R. "Dead Letters and Dead Men: Narrative Purpose in 'Bartleby the Scrivener'," *Studies in Short Fiction*, Vol 27, No. 3, Summer, 1990, pp 329-38

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Short Stories for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Short Stories for Students (SSfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, SSfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of SSfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of SSfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in SSfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by SSfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

SSfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Short Stories for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the SSfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Short Stories for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Short Stories for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from SSfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from SSfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Short Stories for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Short Stories for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of SSfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Short Stories for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Short Stories for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535