

BARTLEBY THE SCRIVENER

by Herman Melville



THE AUTHOR

Herman Melville (1819-1891) was born in New York City. His family later moved to Albany, where his father died and young Herman was forced to go to work in a bank at age 13. He later served briefly as an elementary school teacher and a newspaper reporter. At age 19, he went to sea for the first time. Two years later, he embarked on a lengthy whaling expedition, where he gained the knowledge that became the foundation for his great novels. During the expedition, he and another sailor left the ship on a Pacific island, where he found himself among a tribe of cannibals. His experience became the foundation for his first novel, *Typee* (1846), the most popular of his works during his lifetime. This was followed by *Omoo* (1847) and Melville's great classic, *Moby Dick* (1851). At the time *Moby Dick* was published, Melville had recently met Nathaniel Hawthorne, whose work he greatly admired and to whom he dedicated his masterwork. Melville continued writing until his death in 1891, producing increasingly experimental works including the short story *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853) and the short novel *Billy Budd* (1891).

Melville was a pessimist, an unhappy loner who struggled with despair throughout his life. In the world around him and within himself he saw little but evil. *Bartleby the Scrivener* was the first of Melville's forays into writing for publication in magazines, and is today considered a classic. It has been compared to the greatest stories of human alienation, including the works of Kafka, Dostoevsky, and Camus.

PLOT SUMMARY

The narrator, a business lawyer, speaking in the first person, tells us that Bartleby was the strangest scrivener (law copyist) he had ever encountered. As the story begins, the narrator is a Master in Chancery in New York with an office on Wall Street. He employed two copyists, Turkey and Nippers, and an office boy, Ginger Nut. Turkey was an elderly Englishman who was a dependable worker in the morning but became excitable and careless in the afternoon; he ascribed it to advancing age, but the narrator noticed that his face was always red after lunch. Nippers was twenty-five and bewhiskered; his major flaws were ambition, making him impatient with his work and eager to do his master's without permission, and indigestion, causing him to grind his teeth. He also was known to have shady dealings outside the office. Nippers dressed

well, but Turkey dressed abominably. The fact that Nippers was at his best in the afternoon kept the office in balance to some extent. Ginger Nut, the office boy, was twelve years old and spent most of his time going out for apples and ginger nut cakes for the copyists.

When the narrator became a Master, he obtained more work and therefore needed more help in the office. Bartleby answered the advertisement. He was qualified for the position, and his quiet demeanor recommended him in an office occupied by two such excitable copyists. He was promptly hired and given a desk in the corner of the lawyer's office behind a screen. He wrote quietly and diligently, seemingly not bothered by the tedious nature of the task before him. But the first time the narrator asked him to come into the office to help with a small task, he responded, "I would prefer not to." The lawyer responded with anger, but was completely flabbergasted when the thrice-repeated request met with the same response; in fact, he was too stunned to fire the man on the spot. The days passed, and at every request Bartleby's response was the same - he refused to comply in any way, gave no reason, yet did so with perfect calmness and equanimity. He never left his little cubicle, and seemed to eat nothing more than ginger nut cakes. The lawyer attempted to make excuses and allowances for Bartleby, but could not fathom the reasons for his behavior. Sometimes he had the urge to try to get a rise from his silent clerk, but nothing he did could generate a reaction other than the standard reply, even when he asked him to go to the Post Office or even step into the next room. Eventually, it came to be understood that Bartleby would do his copying, but absolutely nothing else. Soon the narrator came to appreciate Bartleby's steadiness, reliability, and honesty.

One Sunday on the way to church the narrator decided to stop by his office and was astounded to find Bartleby there, half dressed, and even more surprised when his clerk would not admit him until he had finished his affairs. The lawyer could not imagine his copyist doing anything immoral or desecrating the Sabbath by working, and when he returned, he realized that Bartleby had been living in the office. His initial response was to pity the scrivener's isolation, but his pity soon turned to repulsion upon realizing that he could do nothing to reach or aid his strange employee. He never made it to church, and on his way home decided that the next day he would question Bartleby about his background, and if no satisfactory answer were forthcoming, he would discharge him. Not surprisingly, Bartleby refused to answer any questions and the narrator lacked the heart to fire him. Soon everyone else in the office is unconsciously using the word *prefer*.

The next day, Bartleby did nothing but stand looking out the window at the bare wall beyond. When asked, he stated that he had decided to do no more writing. Fearing that all his writing in poor light had affected his eyesight, the narrator said nothing further about it. Several days later, Bartleby informed him that he had permanently given up copying. Concerned that he had no friend in the world and thus reluctant to dismiss him, the lawyer finally gave him notice that he must depart in six days. Six days later, however, Bartleby still sat in his cubicle. The narrator paid him his remaining salary plus twenty dollars' severance and told him to lock the door on his way out, but the next morning he found Bartleby there as usual. Debating whether to throw him out bodily, drive him out with insults, or call the police, the lawyer decides to do nothing at all, remembering the commandment given by Jesus to love one another. In desperation, he began to study theology books - Edwards on the will and Priestley on necessity - dealing with predestination, and decided that Bartleby had been forced on him by some inscrutable decree of Providence.

Soon, however, visitors to the office began to make unpleasant remarks about the inscrutable clerk. The narrator began to fear that Bartleby would ruin his reputation, outlive him, and claim his office by right of occupation. He again expressed his desire that the scrivener vacate the premises, but the man again calmly refused. Still unable to eject him by force or by law, he decided to take the desperate measure of finding a new office, informing Bartleby of his intention, then threatening him with arrest as a trespasser should he appear in the new premises. On moving day the offices were left empty, but Bartleby still stood in his accustomed place. The lawyer feared that Bartleby would follow him to the new office, but he never did. In fact, the next occupant of the office came one day and complained that Bartleby was still there, and still refusing to move or do anything at all. Several weeks later, the narrator again received a complaint, this time that Bartleby, who had been forcibly ejected from the office, continued to haunt the building and scare away customers. The new tenants then begged him to try to do something. He then returned to the old building and spoke to Bartleby, asking him about other occupations in which he might engage and receiving polite refusals to all suggestions, even when he invited him to his own home. Exasperated beyond measure, the narrator took a few days away from the office to clear his mind. Upon returning, he found a note informing him that Bartleby had been removed by the police and taken to the Tombs (the local prison) as a vagrant. The narrator visited him there and found that Bartleby was unaccountably upset with him. He paid the grub-man to bring Bartleby food each day, but Bartleby refused to eat anything. A few days later, the lawyer came again and found Bartleby dead. The only thing the narrator was ever able to discover about Bartleby was that he had previously worked in the Dead-Letter Office in Washington, D.C.

MAJOR CHARACTERS

- Narrator - A lawyer whose brief encounters with the title character make up the substance of the story.
- Turkey - One of the narrator's law copiers, he was an elderly man with a red face.
- Nippers - The narrator's other law clerk, he was a young bewhiskered man who disliked his job.
- Ginger Nut - The narrator's twelve-year-old office boy who was kept occupied getting snacks for the copyists.
- Bartleby - A law copyist who responded to every request by saying, "I would prefer not to."

NOTABLE QUOTATIONS

"I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best." (Narrator, p.40)

"I would prefer not to." (Bartleby, p.47)

“Nothing so aggravates an earnest person as a passive resistance.” (Narrator, p.50)

“Indeed, it was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me, as it were.” (Narrator, p.54)

“The bond of a common humanity now drew me irresistibly to gloom. A fraternal melancholy! For both I and Bartleby were sons of Adam.” (Narrator, p.55)

“To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it.” (Narrator, p.56)

“Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word ‘prefer’ upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way.” (Narrator, p.58)

“Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener, had been all predestined from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom.” (Narrator, p.64-65)

“The man you allude to is nothing to me - he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him.” (Narrator, p.67)

“Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” (Narrator, p.74)

ESSAY QUESTIONS

Discuss the following in a five-paragraph essay:

1. The narrator of Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener* ends his story by sighing, “Ah, Bartleby! Ah, humanity!” Why does Melville identify his pathetic loner with all of humanity? What is he trying to say about the human condition in this novella? Support your answer with specific quotations from the story.
2. In Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the narrator attempts to help Bartleby, on several occasions motivated by verses from the Sermon on the Mount. Why does Melville portray religion as inadequate for the problems with which the unhappy scrivener is troubled? What is the author saying about Christianity and the human condition?
3. By the end of Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the narrator himself is seeking relief in religion from the heavy weight his concern for Bartleby has placed on his shoulders. At one point he says, “Gradually I slid into the persuasion that these troubles of mine, touching the scrivener, had been all predestined from eternity, and Bartleby was billeted upon me for some mysterious purpose of an all-wise Providence, which it was not for a mere mortal like me to fathom.” Why is he unable to find consolation in his belief in Divine Providence?

4. Near the end of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the narrator says to the man who has taken over his old office, "The man you allude to is nothing to me - he is no relation or apprentice of mine, that you should hold me responsible for him." Does Melville really believe that men are not responsible for one another - that I am not my brother's keeper? Use specific quotations from the story to support your answer.
5. When the narrator introduces himself at the beginning of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, he describes himself by saying, "I am a man who, from his youth upwards, has been filled with a profound conviction that the easiest way of life is the best." How accurate is this self-assessment? Does he always take the easy way out as the story progresses? Support your conclusion with specifics from the novella.
6. Evaluate the narrator of Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* as a businessman. Is he an effective and admirable employer? Why or why not? What does he tell us about himself while he is telling the story of Bartleby? Would you like to work for this man? Support your answer with specifics from the story.
7. Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* has at times been used by motivational speakers at business conferences to address that qualities of effective leadership on the job. What lessons do you think such speakers might draw from Melville's classic? Support your answer with specifics and quotations from the story.
8. People today often speak of the dehumanizing effect of the business office, with its cookie-cutter beige cubicles. To what extent do we find such an environment satirized in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*? Is the office the target of the author's satire rather than the people in it? Support your conclusion with specifics from the story.
9. Compare and contrast the picture of the meaninglessness of life found in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. Be sure to consider both the ways life is pictured in the stories and the solutions proposed by the authors, if any.
10. Compare and contrast the picture of the meaninglessness of life found in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* and Albert Camus' *The Stranger*. Be sure to consider both the ways life is pictured in the stories and the solutions proposed by the authors, if any.
11. Compare and contrast the picture of the meaninglessness of life found in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* and Franz Kafka's *Metamorphosis*. Be sure to consider both the ways life is pictured in the stories and the solutions proposed by the authors, if any.
12. Compare and contrast the picture of the meaninglessness of life found in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* and Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Be sure to consider both the ways life is pictured in the stories and the solutions proposed by the authors, if any.

13. To what extent does the title character change in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*? Describe the changes that occur in his behavior. Are these accompanied by changes in attitude? What is the author trying to say in his treatment of Bartleby's character development?
14. To what extent does the narrator change in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*? Are these changes largely caused by Bartleby's presence in his office? What is the author trying to say in his treatment of the narrator's character development?
15. Evaluate the narrator's treatment of the title character in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Does he treat him well or poorly? Be sure to examine his actions, words, and motivations in developing your essay, and support your conclusions from Scripture.
16. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, are the title character and the narrator intended by the author to be foils? Why or why not? Support your answer with details from the story and indicate what ideas Melville is trying to communicate through the pairing of these two characters.
17. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, many critics have pointed out the similarities in the personalities of the narrator and the title character. What are some of these similarities? Do the extreme forms of behavior in which Bartleby engages and the ways the lawyer responds to that behavior reveal the character of the lawyer? Why or why not?
18. Discuss the imagery of food found in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Consider not only the role that food plays in the functioning of the law office, but also its associations with the different characters. What theme is Melville trying to develop through this imagery? Be sure to support your essay with specifics.
19. Sigmund Freud taught that one who never successfully got beyond the earliest stage of life developed an oral fixation. To what extent is this true of the characters in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*? Consider how often the mouth and its functions are mentioned in the story, especially in helping the reader to understand the personalities and behavior of the central characters.
20. Some critics have argued that Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* is a study in chronic depression. To what extent is this an accurate description of the story? Is Melville concerned here with abnormal psychology, or does he have something else in mind? Discuss the significance of Bartleby's extreme behavior in the light of the themes of the novella.
21. Some critics have argued that Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* is a study in manipulation. To what extent does the title character display what might be called a passive-aggressive personality? What might Melville be saying about the power of such behavior? How should such a person be treated? What advice would you give to the lawyer who narrates the story?

22. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, what is the significance of the fact that Bartleby's previous job had been in the Dead Letter Office? What light does this shed on his character?
23. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, what does the title character seek through his behavior? Does he ever find what he seeks? Why or why not? Support your answer with specifics from the story.
24. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, why does the narrator not eject Bartleby from the office? Are his motives purely altruistic, or does he have some selfish reason for keeping the odd scrivener around? Support your conclusion with details from the novella.
25. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, what is the significance of the story being told from the point of view of one of its participants? Why do you think Melville chose a first-person narrative rather than using a third-person omniscient narrator, for instance? What impact does this choice have on the content of the story and the development of its themes?
26. Some existentialists argued that the only way to bring meaning to a meaningless existence is to choose to end it. To what extent is this idea developed in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*? Do you think Melville agreed with that later existentialist dictum? Why or why not?
27. Some existentialists argued that the only way to bring meaning to a meaningless existence is to choose freely. To what extent is this idea developed in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*? Do you think Melville agreed with that later existentialist dictum? Why or why not?
28. One socialist reviewer argues that Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* is a forerunner of the work of Karl Marx and that the title character is a socialist hero whose "righteous rejection of capitalism" who must "die for his sin of rejecting the capitalist system," a man who "knows that there is some better way of living in the world - but [lacks] the ideas and education which would help him to formulate basic socialist principles." Assess this way of interpreting Melville's story. Could the critic possibly have some insight into Melville's intent, or is he simply importing his own political bias into the narrative? Support your conclusion with details from the story.
29. Evaluate the mental condition of the title character in Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Is he mentally ill, and if so is he responsible for his actions? How does your answer to this question affect your assessment of the behavior of those around him, and of the themes of Melville's story?

30. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the narrator at one point argues that "To a sensitive being, pity is not seldom pain. And when at last it is perceived that such pity cannot lead to effectual succor, common sense bids the soul be rid of it." In other words, pity can only be sustained when there is hope of change. Evaluate this idea, discussing what it says about the narrator's way of valuing others. Be sure also to give a biblical perspective on the question of when pity is and is not appropriate.
31. Utilitarianism was a popular ethic in the nineteenth century. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, is the narrator a Utilitarian? Why or why not? What is the author's assessment of such an approach to moral issues? Use specifics from the novella in answering the question.
32. Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener* is a study in profound alienation. To what extent does the author suggest that people can never really know one another? Has he any solution for this alienation? Why do the solutions he proposes fail?
33. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, is the title character a Christ figure, one who refuses to submit to the standards and expectations of those around him and dies as a result? Evaluate this particular interpretation of the story, being sure to cite specific passages in the novella as well as discussing any relevant qualities of Christ Himself.
34. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the narrator is pictured as a Christian, both by his own profession and by his actions, yet he fails in his attempts to do the right thing for his eccentric clerk. What commentary is Melville offering about the Christianity of his era in this story? What characteristics of the church in the nineteenth century might have justified his criticism?
35. In Herman Melville's *Bartleby the Scrivener*, the author pictures the wealthy of his day as unable to empathize with the needs of those outside the mainstream of society. Why does he think this is true? What solution does he propose, if any? What solutions does he picture as inadequate?
36. Compare and contrast the views of the law found in Herman Melville's *Billy Budd* and *Bartleby the Scrivener*. Consider what the author conveys, both about the law as a profession and the law as a standard of justice. Are the two stories, written almost forty years apart, in agreement on the subject, or has Melville's critique of law changed or matured over time? Support your conclusion with details and quotations from the two stories.